Ride Out Singing

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BY ALICE F. LOOMIS

WHITTLESEY HOUSE
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RIDE OUT SINGING

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CHAPTER I

A Tenderfoot Arrives

Phyllis Vernon sat on her yellow tin trunk and looked about her. What she saw filled her with dismay. The little town that straggled its way along the prairie was so much smaller, so much uglier, than she had pictured. For half an hour she had been sitting on the trunk or getting up to walk impatiently up and down the station platform. She was hungry and she was scared. Why didn't Berry come? Surely he knew that it was *today* she was expected!

She had been up and dressed since five o'clock, too eager and excited to sleep. But when the train stopped at Regina and the porter handed her down and set her bags beside her, there was no one to meet her. The platform was empty except for two men who got off the day coach and soon disappeared. Now only the stationmaster was left, and he was busy among the freight and seemed not to notice her.

She hadn't been frightened during all the long journey from England to Canada, not even when the ship found itself surrounded by icebergs and everyone said how dangerous it was—not even in the Pullman when, to her consternation, she found she had to sleep behind nothing

more solid than curtains. But now she felt just like a lost child. It was all she could do not to cry.

She looked at her watch. Seven o'clock. The town was beginning to come awake. A boy drove up in a buckboard, picked up two sacks of mail, and drove off again. From a nearby shack a man in a red coat sauntered out into the sunshine, stretched, glanced up at the sky, and went in again. The stationmaster locked the door of the station house, looked at the stranded girl, hesitated, then put the key in his pocket and went off to his breakfast.

Phyllis felt hungrier and more deserted than ever. She found her temper rising—that quick temper that Uncle Henry had warned her to curb. It was really too bad of Berry. To be late today, of all days! How could he? She remembered the many, many times he had made her wait when they were children, and it never had bothered him at all. In his own good time he would come along, all smiles and sweetness. She supposed it would be the same way today, and she would forgive him just as she always had. You just couldn't help it with Berry.

A little shiver that was partly nervousness passed down her spine. Yet, June as it was, there was a chill in the morning air, and it seemed a good idea to walk down the railway track to get warm. She glanced at her trunk and portmanteau, both neatly labeled "Miss Phyllis Vernon, Care of Richard Beresford Vernon, Regina, Northwest Territories, Canada," and decided it would be safe to leave them there.

"I'll go as far as the fourth telegraph pole without looking," she promised herself. "Perhaps by that time Berry will have come." But when she faced about, he hadn't.

Someone else had, however. The wearer of the red coat was walking briskly toward her, and as he came near she saw that he was a very young man in the uniform of the Northwest Mounted Police. My goodness, thought the girl, alarmed, he's coming right down the track. Does he mean to speak to me?

He evidently did. The young man brought his heels together—very military he was—and saluted. "Miss Vernon?" he inquired.

"Why ye-es," faltered Phyllis, gray eyes wide open. "But . . . how did you know?"

"A good guess, I'm afraid." And an engaging, a most unmilitary smile spread over his good-looking face. "You see Vernon told me he was expecting his sister, and when I saw a young lady waiting around here. . . ."

Phyllis smiled back. She couldn't help it. There was a gleam in those dark eyes that seemed to say, "Isn't this a lark!"

She took him in at a glance, from the military "pillbox" cap set so absurdly on the side of his head to the yellow cavalry stripe down his close-fitting breeches and the shining boots and spurs. With his round boyish face and slim figure, he looked not much older than her own seventeen—or nearly seventeen. Her worries slipped off her

back and she began, quite cheerfully, to explain her dilemma.

"Your brother'll be along soon, don't worry," advised her new friend. "Just late probably. It's quite a long way, you know, to get here so early."

Phyllis didn't know; she had very little idea of how or where her brother lived, in spite of all his letters. She only knew that at last she had come to keep house for him. They had planned it all more than three years ago, when she was thirteen and he, five years older, was already grown up. And now he wasn't here to meet her! Phyllis had a flash of indignation. But she couldn't stay indignant, not with that youth smiling at her so gaily, and suggesting that they should walk up and down together.

"My name's Taylor," he remarked, "Constable Taylor." He spoke the word "Constable" as proudly as though it had been "Colonel."

He hasn't been in the Mounted Police long, thought Phyllis shrewdly, and added out loud, "You're English, aren't you?"

"Rather. Only been out three months."

"And do you like it here?" Phyllis blurted out. Ever since she had left England the question of whether she would "like it" had been at the back of all her thoughts.

"Rather!" This time his voice was full of enthusiasm.

"It seems a very . . . very bare country," she stammered.

"Ah, but you soon get the feel of it. I thought it was

bare at first. But there's something glorious—anyhow, it makes you feel glorious. Wait until you've got a horse under you and a twenty-mile ride ahead of you! You do ride, don't you?"

"Not twenty miles," she replied. "I've never ridden even two miles," and she laughed out loud at his look of dismay. "When I was little we had a pony and I sometimes rode him in the lane. That's about all my riding. But I did bring a saddle," she added. "Berry told me I must."

"That's good, anyhow. You'll ride a lot here, everyone does," he assured her. "See my charger—isn't he a beauty?" And he pointed to a powerful chestnut hitched in front of the Police shack. "I'm on duty in town this week."

"Where are you other times?" she inquired after the chestnut had been properly admired.

"At the barracks, two miles away. But we have telephone connection. We'll be getting our orders for the day in a few minutes."

"Not over the telephone," cried Phyllis incredulously, "not all that distance!"

"Yes, really. I've even heard dogs barking at the other end."

Phyllis could hardly believe her ears and glanced at the young man to see if he was making fun of her. But his eyes were fixed on a wagon which was bumping slowly along the mud-dried ruts of the main street.

"There's Vernon now!"

Phyllis did not wait to hear more. With a hasty good-by, she ran stumbling across the rough ground, calling "Berry, Berry!" at the top of her voice.

The driver heard, and the horses were pulled up sharply. Twisting the reins round the whip, he jumped down and hurried toward his sister. As he drew near, Phyllis stopped running and watched him come. Her heart was beating fast. How big he seemed, broad-shouldered and brown! Except for the yellow hair shining in the sunlight, she thought she would hardly have known him. His hands felt rough in hers, but in the hearty kiss he gave her there was no doubt of her welcome.

They stood grinning at each other. "Well, here you are, old girl," said Berry at last. "Didn't I tell you away back in 1881 that you'd be coming out to be my housekeeper?"

"Yes, but you can't think what a fuss there was, everybody saying I was too young. And *you* didn't help things much, you know, writing to warn me that things were pretty rough."

"Well, they are and they aren't. But. . . ."

"It started out by being rough," she reproached him, "when you weren't at the station to meet me. I was afraid you weren't coming, and I didn't know what on earth I should do. Oh, why were you so late?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Phyl. It was just bad luck. One of the horses cast a shoe halfway to town and I just couldn't make it. Then of course the train had to be on time for once—it hardly ever is. Hello, Taylor," he called

to the young Policeman who had sauntered up. "Come and meet my sister."

Phyllis and the constable exchanged smiles. "We've met already," remarked the former. "I was all ready to sit down and cry when Mr. Taylor came along and cheered me up."

"Sorry," said Berry once more, but this time he did not look particularly contrite. "Don't you think Kent and I are lucky," he went on, his arm round his sister's shoulder, "to have such a good-looking housekeeper? Well, we must be off." And he waved a good-by as he helped her up onto the spring seat of the wagon.

It was still not eight o'clock when the brother and sister tied up in front of the two-story building marked "Windsor Hotel." As soon as they were seated at the table and the order given, Phyllis could not wait longer to ask the question that had been on the tip of her tongue.

"What did you mean, Berry," she began, and hesitated —"what did you mean about my being housekeeper for you and Kent? What is Kent—a horse or a dog or what? You don't mean a *person,* do you?"

Berry did not look at all upset. "Kent, my dear, is my partner—Kent Averill—and a corking fine chap he is, believe me. He has the quarter section next to mine and we're working the two places as one. We were living together already, you see—built the house across the border line. When it was settled for you to come, it seemed silly for him to move. All we had to do was to add on another

room for you. He made a fuss at first, but I told him you'd be delighted." Berry beamed at his sister as though everything had been satisfactorily explained.

During this long explanation the girl's eyes had grown larger and larger with astonishment, but at the last sentence astonishment turned to indignation. "But I'm not delighted," she blazed, "why should I be? You never said a single word about any partner in your letters . . . it isn't fair. I came to be with you, not with a whole lot of people." It was too much. First, Berry not being at the station to meet her, and then to learn that there was to be a stranger living with them. She felt the angry tears rising in her throat, and tried vainly to choke them down.

The young man looked taken aback. "I never thought you'd mind." His tone was contrite. "It's only old Kent, it isn't a whole lot of people!" He reached across the table and lifted her chin. "Oh come on, Phyl," he said affectionately, "don't take it like that. You and he'll get on like a house afire."

"Aunt Lydia never would let me stay if she knew—and without any chaperone!" In spite of all she could do a tear ran down her face. Anger was giving way to dismay. "I do think you ought to have told me."

"Perhaps I ought," he admitted at last. Then he grinned, a naughty-boy grin. "But it did seem a bit wiser not to say anything to Aunt Lydia. She couldn't understand how things are out here. But as for a chaperone, I'm your chaperone, my good girl, and don't you forget it. I'd

like to know what old woman could take better care of you than I can." His tone was swaggering, but his eyes begged her. "I do want you to like old Kent—he's so awfully decent. See, here comes coffee—you'll feel better with some breakfast in you." He poured cream into her cup and added a heaping spoonful of sugar.

Phyllis wiped her eyes and took a sip of the hot sweet coffee. Immediately the lump in her throat grew smaller. "Is he very old?" she murmured.

Berry burst out laughing. "I didn't mean old in that sense. He's an ancient, ancient man of almost twenty-five."

To the girl's surprise, with each mouthful of food, she felt more cheerful. And when the eggs were finished and wheat cakes appeared, she was able to say, "Well, if you think such a lot of him, perhaps I shan't mind so much."

But to herself she added, "But I did so look forward to being just us two together."

"Good girl." Berry patted her on the back as they rose from the table. "Now I've got all sorts of errands to attend to, stores to buy, and so on. Would you like to rest in the ladies' parlor?"

"Oh, no, Berry, please. I should be so embarrassed. Let me come with you."

"Come along by all means and have a look at the capital of the Northwest Territories!"

CHAPTER II

Pigs and People in a Prairie Town

By ten-thirty the lame horse had been to the blacksmith for a new shoe, and the wagon was piled high with an odd assortment of freight. There was Phyllis's trunk as well as a couple of packing cases which had arrived ahead of her and contained some of her most prized possessions. They were marked "Settler's Effects" and had passed through the customs without duty. Lashed on top of these was a small armchair which Berry had insisted she would need as there "wasn't a comfortable chair in the house." Beside and on top of these personal possessions lay bags of feed, a roll of mosquito netting, a plowshare newly sharpened, some harness, and several pots of paint.

"Now for the groceries," said Berry, "and then we're off."

Phyllis followed her brother inside the general store, and saw with surprise that behind a false front of painted wood, the walls and roof were of canvas. She was startled at the size of Berry's purchases: five pounds of tea, for instance—whoever heard of buying so much at once?—and ten pounds of coffee; fifty pounds of sugar, no less—was he crazy? She stood by him in growing surprise. At

last, when it came to a side of bacon, she couldn't hold in any longer. "Why, Berry, isn't that an awful lot?" she exclaimed. But Berry only replied absent-mindedly, "We may not be in town again for a good while," and went on ordering from his list.

Just then the door opened and a tall girl came in. She stopped short when she saw Phyllis, and for a moment the two eyed each other curiously. Phyllis had met a great many men at their different points of call during the morning, but except for the waitress at the hotel, this was the first girl. The newcomer held herself rather stiffly upright; she had an honest face and friendly hazel eyes.

"Why you must be Berry Vernon's sister," she cried, her face lighting up. "You look just like him! I knew you were coming of course, but hadn't heard it was to be today. I'm Mary Tilton," she added, holding out her hand.

"Oh, I know! Berry often talked about you in his letters, and said how kind you had all been to him." As Phyllis felt the firm handshake of the other, she felt sure that here was a friend.

"We've been so excited about your coming," Mary confided after Berry had joined them. "It was fun getting everything ready, wasn't it, Mr. Vernon?"

Berry let his hand drop lightly on her shoulder as he answered, "You did the work, I had the fun. And by the way"—turning her toward him—"why not drop the formality and get back to 'Berry'?"

Mary blushed and turned to Phyllis. "I hope you'll like

everything. Of course, it's rather rough—not like home."

"Oh, I shall like it, especially if you helped. I'm dying to see the farm and the house and everything."

At that moment a ten-year-old boy slipped in through the door and pulled at Mary's arm. "Ma says you're to bring them home to lunch," he said in a loud whisper, and glanced shyly at Phyllis. "I told her the team was in."

Mary eagerly repeated the invitation.

"I'm afraid we ought to get started," hesitated Berry.

"Ma said," the boy went on, but this time addressing Berry, "we could have lunch early."

"Oh, do stay," cried Mary. "Please. It wouldn't take much more time."

"Couldn't we?" begged Phyllis. She wanted to see more of this tall girl with the lovely smile.

So it was settled. Leaving Berry and young Peter Tilton to load the groceries into the wagon, the two girls walked arm in arm up the street. The beaten footpath led past houses, few of which were even painted, and Phyllis noticed there wasn't a tree in the whole town. But Mary's voice had a touch of pride as she pointed out the post office and the school and a white-painted church some distance off on the prairie.

"Two years ago there was nothing here"—she made a sweeping gesture—"unless you count buffalo bones—there were plenty of them."

Rooting his way down the street came a pig. It seemed queer to Phyllis that a pig should be loose in a town, but

Mary did not seem to notice anything out of the way.

Regina, thought Phyllis, Queen. I suppose the place is named for Queen Victoria. What a compliment! She just managed not to giggle.

"Here we are," cried Mary as they turned a corner. A small square house, painted white, stood enclosed in a white picket fence. Everything about it was pleasing, from the curtains in the windows to the flowers pushing their way up in the little garden.

Before Phyllis could get in a word of admiration, she was being bustled into the house by stout, comfortable Mrs. Tilton, who had been watching for them from the doorstep.

Mrs. Tilton kissed Phyllis, took her hat and coat, and settled her in the most comfortable chair in the room, declaring she must be tired after that long journey and the morning's shopping. She dispatched Mary to the kitchen to get lunch in a hurry, and then began to ply Phyllis with questions about the sea voyage, lamenting that she herself had never crossed the ocean.

"But the doctor was in England when he was a young man," she concluded. "Probably Berry told you about his meeting your parents?" Then at Phyllis's look of astonishment, "But of course he hasn't had time to tell you anything yet, you poor child. We only figured out the other day that it was the same Vernon."

Phyllis wondered why she was a "poor child," but there was no time to find out, for at that moment Berry and

Dr. Tilton came into the house together. The doctor took Phyllis's hand in both of his and stood looking down at her from his six feet two of height.

"Yes," he said at last, tipping her face forward with a finger under her chin, "you remind me of her, of your mother. Wild-rose complexion, gray eyes with just that same candid look, and hair like hers, too. Not golden, like the young sun god over there"—and he nodded carelessly toward Berry—"but sort of sunshiny just the same." He lightly touched the wavy hair on the girl's upturned head.

Phyllis looked down to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes. Since the tragic death in a drowning accident of her beloved father and mother only two years ago, she could never hear them spoken of without emotion. With an effort she controlled her voice enough to say, "I'm so glad you knew them—it makes them seem less far away."

Here Mrs. Tilton interrupted. "Papa, you mustn't upset the child—she's tired and hungry. Come along, my dear," she said to Phyllis, leading the way through the archway into the little dining room, "and sit you down here. A cup of hot tea will do you good. And you too, Berry. You must be hungry as a hunter with nothing but that rubbishy hotel stuff for breakfast."

Phyllis hurriedly wiped her eyes and took the chair Mrs. Tilton was holding out. As she looked round the table she decided that she liked these people: the tall, kindly doctor, Mrs. Tilton so fussy and motherly, Mary who already seemed like an old friend, and that jolly little boy with

freckles on his nose who was staring at her from over his slice of bread. Berry sat opposite her; he caught her eye and made a tiny grimace, just as he used to do when she was a child and he a big schoolboy. She felt warm and happy; her doubts and fears of the morning seemed to melt away.

Mary broke in on her thoughts by asking if she liked to cook.

"Ye-es, I think I do," replied Phyllis uncertainly, as she buttered the delicious hot biscuit, "but you see at home I was pretty busy with my studies and hadn't much time. This spring I did go to cooking school, and Aunt Lydia's cook was awfully good to me. She taught me lots of things, especially how to make bread. She said it would be more useful to me than the soufflés and jellies they had you make at the cooking class."

"Sensible cook," commented Dr. Tilton.

"You poor child," ejaculated Mrs. Tilton for the second time. And now she added, "You're too young to be responsible for feeding those big hungry lads. What was your aunt thinking about to let you come out here alone?"

"Just how old are you, Phyllis?" the doctor asked quietly.

"Seventeen next month."

"Hmmm. And about as big as a minute! Well, if you get into any difficulties, remember you have friends here. She's welcome to come anytime and stay as long as she likes, isn't she, Mother?"

"Indeed she is," replied Mrs. Tilton heartily.

"It's awfully kind of you," exclaimed Phyllis. She meant it, but at the same time she could not help thinking, Why should I get into any difficulty? Anyhow Berry will always be there.

After lunch Phyllis had a chance to ask the question that had been burning on her lips. The two girls were upstairs in Mary's bedroom, and Mary was admiring the blue coat with silver buttons her new friend was wearing.

"Tell me something about this . . ." Phyllis began, "about this Kent Averill."

"Oh, he's nice," replied Mary promptly. "Rather quiet —not a bit like Berry. But then he's twenty-five. Daddy says he knows a lot about farming and that Berry is lucky to have him for a partner."

"Has he always been a farmer, then?"

"I don't think so, but he grew up on his grandfather's farm in Ontario. Berry says he was in a bank or something in the East, and hated it."

"Berry seems to think a lot of him," said Phyllis as she picked up her hat. Then she blurted out, "But *I* didn't know a thing about him until today." She had not meant to admit this, but it came out in spite of herself.

Mary glanced at her guiltily, and looked down. You might have thought the girl herself was to blame. "I know," she confessed, "I told Berry it wasn't fair to you, but he wouldn't do anything but laugh."

"Don't you worry, Mary." Phyllis flung her arm impul-

sively round her new friend's waist. "If Berry likes him, and you like him, I shall like him, too."

Mary kissed her. "You're a dear," she said. Their friendship was sealed.

Peter's face appeared round the corner of the bedroom door. "Mr. Vernon says you're to hurry, he's waiting."

"Oh, my goodness, we promised to be quick!" Phyllis rammed her hat onto her head and they ran pell-mell downstairs to find the wagon at the door and the family assembled to say good-by. Phyllis did not need helping this time, but put her foot on the hub of the wheel, then onto the iron step, and was up on the seat in a jiffy.

Mrs. Tilton, all anxiety for the girl's pretty dress, scolded Berry for coming in the wagon instead of the buckboard.

"She's a farmer, now, riding out with the load," he exclaimed, unrepentant.

"Get along with you," retorted Mrs. Tilton, giving the young man a friendly push, "and see that you take care of that sweet young sister of yours."

He was up. The horses started. They were off, Phyllis waving good-by as they went.

CHAPTER III

The Farm on the Pile o' Bones Creek

Phyllis drew a long breath and hugged her brother's arm. "Now we're really getting started," she cried, and looked happily up into his face. How sweet Berry was when he smiled! The corners of his mouth turned up as if he never in the world could be in a bad humor.

They turned north and bumped over the railroad track, Phyllis holding onto her hat and bouncing on the spring seat. Regina was behind them. Before them stretched the prairie, the wide, empty prairie. Not a house in sight, not a tree or even the smallest shrub. The grass itself was short and stiff-looking and could not possibly wave in the wind as she had imagined it would.

But Phyllis was not in a mood now to care how short the grass was, or how empty the prairie. She was here at last with her precious brother. Besides, there was something invigorating about it all—there certainly was. She put up her head and sniffed the breeze, which was scented with flowers and pure from its journey over a thousand miles of prairie.

It's making me feel glorious already, she thought. Just as that Mounted Police boy said.

The patches of wild flowers delighted her, especially the dwarf prairie roses, white, pink, and crimson, that lined the trail on either side.

"Oh, Berry, we must stop and gather some," she cried.

Berry handed her the reins, jumped down, picked a crimson rose and bud, and climbed back without checking the horses. "Here you are, smell it. We'll see them all the way home, and I shouldn't wonder if old Kent hadn't decorated the house in your honor. He's been going around cleaning up everything for the past week. It's my opinion he's terrified of you!"

Kent! She had almost forgotten him. So he was terrified of her! How funny, for that was the way she felt about him.

A tiny whirlwind stirred the grass, neatly spun Phyllis's wide hat into the air, and dropped it in the wagon box behind her.

"Leave it there," she cried. "I'm more comfortable without the thing. Does it often blow like this?"

"Most of the time. You'll get used to it."

By and by they overtook an Indian on horseback, riding at a foot pace, gun on shoulder. Behind him, on foot, trudged his squaw, bowed under the weight of a sack of flour.

"Oh, Berry, look. What a shame! That heavy sack! Can't you make him carry it himself, or at least put it on the pony?"

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"No, I can't, my dear," replied her brother. "And what's more, she wouldn't thank me if I did."

"How nitchie." He gave the Indian greeting as the horseman turned aside to let the wagon pass, and the man responded with a grunted "How." The squaw was silent, but she paused a moment to stare at the white girl, and Phyllis fancied that she saw on the impassive face the dawn of a response to her own smile.

"You see the kind of country you've come to"—Berry grinned—"where the women do the hard work." Sometimes, in the days to come, Phyllis recalled that joking remark.

The horses jogged along, never going fast, and sometimes walking. The trail went on and on, following the natural contours of the land. Phyllis began to weary of looking at flowers and watching the gophers that sat up so perkily by the roadside and then disappeared with a whisk of their tails into their holes as the wagon drew near. Even the hawks soaring overhead, their shadows drifting below them on the prairie, ceased to interest her. She was tired and she wished there was something to lean back against.

"Can't the horses go a little faster?" she asked. "They're so slow."

"Not this heavy team. Awfully bad for them to be hurried. Next time we'll have the driving horses and the buckboard. Cheer up—in another half hour we'll be home."

"What are the driving horses?"

"A pair—Topsy and Turvey we call them. They can whisk the buckboard along pretty fast. Good in the saddle, too. Topsy is to be your special mount. Then Kent has his own horse, Gray Lady, and there's another working team like this."

"Quite a lot. I didn't suppose you had so many horses."

"We need them all." Berry smiled at her.

It was nearly four o'clock when they turned off onto a side trail that ran its winding way to Berry's homestead. Phyllis sat as tall as she could to see what was coming. There on her left hand was the creek with that funny name, Pile o' Bones, that he had told her about. Horses and cattle were grazing along its banks. Right ahead stood the house and barn. Beyond, stretched fields of young wheat and oats, looking strangely vivid against the grayer green of the prairie grass.

But it was the house which Phyllis was most eager to see. Berry had never sent even a photograph, and she had not been able to make head or tail of his meager descriptions. She hoped, oh, she did hope, it would be pretty.

Already she could see that her imagined picture of a house shaded by trees was an impossible one. She gave up the trees. But she still clung to her idea of a low rambling cottage set among flower beds. She stopped talking and shut her eyes.

"Tell me when we get there, Berry."

"I say, don't get your hopes up," he replied uneasily. "It isn't so much, you know."

"I know it will be lovely." She was hanging tight onto her dream.

The horses trotted on, then stopped. Phyllis sat a moment more with closed eyes. She didn't exactly pray, but she sent out a wish. Then she opened them—and gasped.

What she saw was a story-and-a-half frame house, one side painted white, the other still showing the raw yellow of new wood. A ladder leaned against the gable. On the ground lay piles of lumber and empty paintpots instead of the flower beds of her imagination. The windows were bare and uncurtained, and the place in its half-built condition seemed to the girl utterly forlorn. Her dream house crashed in fragments. How stupid she had been to imagine Berry's house would be like an English home. How stupid, stupid, stupid! But there he was holding out his arms to lift her from the wagon, and saying, "Guess old Kent has been working on the veranda."

She gulped down her disappointment. It wasn't Berry's fault if she had been such a simpleton.

"Here we are at last," he cried, as he took her by the arm and ran her into the house, "and I hope you aren't going to find things too rough."

The very first thing her eyes lighted on was a bowl of wild roses, and her exclamation of pleasure seemed to satisfy her brother. Except for the flowers the room was as bare as a bachelor's room is likely to be—no curtains, no pictures, no rug. Along one wall Phyllis noted a comfortable sofa covered with a buffalo robe. Facing the front

door a staircase led up to the chamber above. Below it stood a low bookcase but, as she soon saw to her disappointment, it was by no means filled with books. Pipes and a tobacco jar, files, a monkey wrench, a saucer of screws, and other oddments of hardware had been dropped onto the vacant shelves.

Even in front of the one shelf of books there were cartridge shells standing in a row like little soldiers.

Tired from the long drive, homesick though she did not realize it, Phyllis's heart sank still further. Was this comfortless room the home she had looked forward to so happily and that Berry had written of so proudly? He was looking at her now, waiting for her to speak, expecting her to like it. With a great effort she kept the disappointment out of her face.

"Is that actually a buffalo robe on the sofa?" she cried at last. "And the snowshoes crossed above it, they do look interesting. Why, it isn't rough at all," she lied gallantly.

The young man looked pleased. "But wait until you see *your* room. That and the kitchen are new, you know. Until we put up the addition, we cooked, ate, mended harness, and did everything here. So now we feel pretty swell."

He threw open a door and disclosed a room about eight by ten feet. The two windows, one in front and one at the side, were curtained in dotted swiss, and a homemade dressing table was draped with the same material over blue sateen. In one corner stood an iron bedstead, in an-

other a washstand complete with pitcher and basin.

This was better, and Phyllis made the most of it. "Why, it's sweet. It's darling!" She ran over to the dressing table and lifted the draperies. There were shelves underneath, neatly covered with oilcloth.

"Mary's idea," commented Berry modestly, "until we can afford a real bureau. She chose the rug, made all the curtains, and fixed up that place in the corner for your dresses."

Phyllis sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed. She had a queer feeling that too much had happened in one day—more than she could stand. "What a lot of trouble you've taken for me"—she faltered—"and that nice Mary . . . I don't see why. . . ." Quite to her own surprise and to Berry's consternation she began to cry.

He dropped down on his knee beside her. "Why, Phyl darling, what is it? Are you tired to death?"

She shook her head and passed a hand across her eyes. "It's nothing really. I'm just silly . . . I can't seem to do anything today but cry . . . it was only . . . only that I couldn't help wishing Mummy was here." And in spite of herself out came a sob.

Berry turned his head aside. "Ah, yes," he said soberly. "I often feel that way too. I wonder if they know."

There was a clatter of stove lids in the kitchen. Berry jumped to his feet. "It's Kent!" he said. "Let's wait here a minute. He'll want to get to his room and clean up before he sees you. Then we're to have four o'clock tea. Oh,

it's all arranged. It takes something to make old Kent knock off work in the middle of the afternoon, I can tell you."

Phyllis wiped her eyes, and the two listened to sounds of the fire being lighted, and exchanged smiles as footsteps tiptoed past the door.

"Now we can go out," said Berry, "and we'll have a look at the kitchen." The kitchen proved to be even barer than the sitting room. The walls and floor were fresh unpainted wood—the latter none too clean. A converted packing case furnished with shelves held the china and groceries. Behind the cookstove were two more shelves, one for oil lamps, the other filled with blackened pots and pans. Some dirty dish towels hung from a string across a corner. A couple of rough tables and a chair or two completed the equipment. The cold north light coming in at the one window added nothing in the way of cheerfulness.

Rather different from Aunt Lydia's kitchen, with its gleaming brass and copper, thought Phyllis, and oh, how unlike the dear little kitchen in Mummy's house that looked out onto the flower garden, so that it was a pleasure to work in it. "But I'm here, and not there," she told herself grimly.

By now steam was coming out of the spout of the kettle, and the purring sound seemed to make the room a little more homelike. "Do you want me to get tea ready?" asked Phyllis, looking round helplessly.

"Not today. Today you do nothing but look pretty."

"Very well. If I'm to look pretty, I'll go and unpack a few things and beautify myself."

Phyllis retired into her bedroom. There she laid her hat carefully on the shelf below the dressing table, hung her coat behind the cretonne curtain, and shook out the skirt which had become crumpled from sitting so long. From her traveling bag she took out brush and comb, sponge, soap and toothbrush, and set them in place.

One look in the mirror sent her hurrying to the washstand to bathe her eyes in cold water. She emerged dripping from the basin, dried her face on the linen towel, and rubbed her cheeks to take off the shine. Already she felt better. Next she combed out her hair, and tied the long curls back with a dark blue ribbon. The face reflected in the mirror seemed to look attentively at her. "What are you doing here, Phyllis Vernon?" it seemed to question her. "Are you going to be a good sport, or are you not? Are you ever going to get over your silly habit of being happy one minute and nearly ready to cry the next?" She made a grimace at the reflection and turned away. But she sat on, aware that she was lingering because she felt shy of meeting Kent. She couldn't help resenting him a little bit. She had so looked forward to being with Berry. And now there would always be someone else in the house.

The sitting room was empty when she went in. Berry had brought in the armchair, and the note of blue in its upholstery immediately pleased her. But where was Berry

himself? There seemed to be nobody in the house. Yes, there was. Someone was coming downstairs. It must be Kent. Her heart gave a little pitapat of excitement, and the pink rushed into her cheeks.

A tall young man appeared. He was dressed in white doeskin breeches and a white shirt open at the neck. His hair was chestnut brown and matched his eyes. They stood and looked at one another for a moment in silence, then smiled and awkwardly shook hands.

"Hello, you two got acquainted already?" Berry breezed in. "Isn't she a grand sister for a fellow to have?"—giving her an affectionate pat on the shoulder. "And isn't he the swell partner?" he went on, his eyes gleaming fun as he saw the two eying each other shyly. "Look at his breeches —made them himself."

"Don't be an ass, Berry." Kent looked more embarrassed than ever.

"But he did, Phyl. Dressed the skins, cut out the breeches, sewed them with sinew, and there they are. Look as if he'd been poured into them."

Phyllis tried to say it was awfully clever of him, but Berry did not give her much time. "Purely a mathematical problem," he broke in. "The walls were covered with calculations for days before he ever put knife to leather."

"Don't be an ass," said Kent again. But the ice was broken, and this time they all laughed together.

Thanks to Berry's high spirits, tea turned out to be a merry meal, at which they sat round the table and drank

numerous cups of a strong black beverage and consumed thick slices of bread and jam. It felt like a picnic, Phyllis thought, as her shyness began to wear off. Berry wanted to know whether she had been seasick.

"No-o-o . . . well . . . sort of just one day when it was really rough. But there was a man in the deck chair next to mine who had crossed seventeen times, and he advised me to stick it out and not go below. So I did, and I got over it. We talked a lot," she went on. "I told him all about coming out here."

"And what did he say to that?"

Phyllis giggled. "He thought I was too intelligent to bury myself in the wilderness," she replied demurely.

Berry threw up his hands in mock indignation. "She's too good for us already, Kent. What do you think of that? Prove it, my good girl, prove that you are too intelligent for your present company." But Berry gave her no chance to speak. "Come on, Kent," he cried. "Say something to show that you're intelligent, too."

"I guess Miss Phyllis will have to figure that out for herself."

"Well, then, sing to her." And picking up his banjo he began to thrum out an accompaniment.

But Kent shook his head. "Not now, it's time for chores. I fancy I hear the cows singing to be milked."

Berry groaned and laid aside the banjo. "Always leading me into the path of duty!" As he obediently followed his partner out of the room he turned back at the thresh-

old and once again made that special grimace at his sister that used to be their signal in nursery days.

Phyllis sat on, smiling to herself. "Perhaps it won't be so bad here after all," she thought. Gathering up the cups and plates, she carried them into the kitchen. "Berry is just as crazy as ever." Then, "I think I like this Kent. Perhaps I'm a little afraid of him, too. He didn't say much, but I could feel he was sizing me up all the time. Anyhow, he has lovely hair," she concluded.

CHAPTER IV

A Riding Lesson and a Spill

"Hi, you girl, where's my monkey wrench?" called Berry from the sitting room.

"It's here on the kitchen shelf," Phyllis called back, "along with all the screws and cartridges and other messy things that were cluttering up the bookcase." She and Kent were still at breakfast in the kitchen, finishing off the last pancakes.

"Another reform, eh?" Berry mocked as he picked up the wrench. "See what she's done to us in one week, Kent —curtains at the windows, pictures on the walls, a fancy thing she calls an India print on the sofa instead of the good old buffalo robe, and now all our things moved out here. And when you first stepped into this house, miss"— he pointed an accusing finger at his sister—"you told me you liked it."

"I never said so. Anyway, if I did, I like it better now. Won't you stick up for me?" She turned to Kent. "Doesn't the bookcase look better with just books and Mummy's Spode cups and saucers? Say it does, please."

"It sure does, Miss Phyllis," he agreed. "Still. . . ." He hesitated, pushed his napkin into the ring and stood up.

"Still what?" She wasn't going to let him go without answering.

"Seems as if we ought to have a few cartridges handy, since the gun is in that room."

"All right, the cartridges shall stay," she conceded. "But you do like the curtains, don't you?" Her tone seemed to beg him to say yes. She had been busy all week making them from the material she had brought with her.

"They keep out the light," objected Berry, before Kent could answer.

"They do not," she contradicted him. "They're quite thin. But I'll push them further back if that will please you."

"He likes them all right," interrupted Kent. "Stop teasing your sister, Berry, and come on out. We're late as it is."

"And you are going to take me riding this afternoon, aren't you?" called Phyllis after his retreating back.

"That's right, I am," replied Kent, looking back. "Directly after dinner. Lesson number one."

"Good," thought Phyllis to herself as she picked her apron off the hook and tied it around her. "I'm glad I had the courage to remind him." She was thrilled at the thought of wearing her new habit for the first time, and rather thrilled that it was to be Kent and not Berry who would take her out. She still felt a little shy with Kent; he was so quiet, and she often wondered if he approved of her. Of course he never teased her openly, like Berry, but

sometimes he did seem to be poking fun at her. She was never quite sure.

"Well, I mustn't stand dawdling here," she told herself as she piled the breakfast dishes into the dishpan and poured water onto them from the heavy iron teakettle. "Dishes, dishes, everlasting dishes. I bet I've washed more dishes in this last week than in all my life before—even if Berry does do them in the evening," she added half grudgingly. It wasn't only their own dishes; there were the milk pails and pans, which she was told must be washed in fresh water, scalded, and set out in the sun to air. Water was kept in a barrel in the corner of the kitchen and had to be dipped into the kettle, and more than once she had had to go down to the well near the stable to get more, when Berry had forgotten to fill the barrel.

If it were not for the kitchen work she could enjoy herself, as it was rather fun to be mistress of a house. She certainly had improved the look of the sitting room. For one thing, she always had plenty of flowers about—today it was the white anemones that grew so plentifully by the creek, but whew! how the mosquitoes had swarmed about her as she gathered them. The best thing in the room, however, was her father's painting which hung in the place of honor. She was never weary of looking at the familiar green reaches, quiet stream, and filmy sky—the sky of England—that brought back their old home on the bank of the Thames.

Well, she must hurry, dinner was supposed to be at

twelve o'clock, and they seemed to think it was important to be punctual. This was the first day she had undertaken to get dinner alone. Up to now Berry had helped her at noon and in the evening, and Kent had made the breakfast. But yesterday Berry had told her they really needed the time outside, and wasn't she ready to take over. So she was on her mettle to show what she could do. Bacon and eggs, baked potatoes, young radishes from the garden, rice pudding and coffee formed the menu—nothing difficult if only she could have it all ready on time.

And this afternoon she was to go riding! Hurrah!

The two men praised her dinner, and as soon as it was over and the dishes stacked in the kitchen, Phyllis hurried to put on her riding habit.

"Wouldn't you rather saddle your horse before you change?" suggested Kent mildly between puffs from his pipe.

Phyllis paused with her hand on the doorknob. She opened her eyes in surprise. "Saddle my own horse?"

Kent leaned his elbows on the table and looked at her quizzically. "Lesson number one, you know. You want to be a horsewoman, don't you?"

"Ye-es," agreed Phyllis. "But is that part of it?"

He nodded. "Elementary. Today we begin with saddling and bridling."

"And not go out at all!" Phyllis's face fell.

Berry laughed and mimicked her, "Not go out at all!" He clapped her on the back. "Of course you'll go out.

Don't let him fool you. All the same, you do his way, like a good girl." And off he went, whistling.

Phyllis relaxed. "What shall I do first, then?" She turned slowly and reluctantly back into the room.

There was a twinkle in Kent's eye as he leaned back in his chair and remarked, "You might catch Topsy and tie her to the hitching rail. Just shake a pan of oats at her and she'll probably let you come near. Don't rush her, take your time. After she has settled down to eat a few mouthfuls, you can put up a hand quietly and take her by the halter."

Phyllis was boiling mad as she got a pan of oats from the bin in the stable and walked down into the pasture. "Sitting there comfortably and sending me for the horse, indeed. Why did I come?" But she knew very well why she had come. She couldn't quite imagine herself doing anything else when Kent had suggested it. Still, she was furious. And he was laughing at her. She'd show him she could catch a horse as well as he could!

There was Topsy, a little apart from the other horses. Phyllis rattled the oats in the pan. Topsy looked up for a moment then went back to grazing. Walking slowly toward her and making chirruping noises, the girl hopefully shook the pan. Topsy looked interested, stretched out her neck and advanced warily. Phyllis stood quite still. Still warily, the horse snatched a mouthful of oats; then as Phyllis moved a hand, she flung up her head and cantered off. Oh dear, she had been too quick. Now she had

to begin all over again. What had Kent said? Don't rush her! Why hadn't he come himself if he knew so much about it. But now again she was intent on catching her mount. She meant to ride this afternoon, no matter what anyone said or did.

This time she was more careful. When Topsy could not resist the temptation of the oats any longer, Phyllis let her eat half the panful before stirring hand or foot. Then very slowly, very carefully, she snapped a lead strap onto the halter while the horse was still eating, and the fight was over.

By the time she had got back to the house, triumphantly leading the horse, her bad temper had evaporated. Kent meanwhile had brought out her sidesaddle and was waiting for her at the hitching rail. He gave her an approving smile.

"Ever put on a bridle?" he asked, and when she shook her head, he slipped the bit into Topsy's mouth, pulled her ears through the headband, and buckled the throat latch. "Simple, isn't it?" He smiled. "Now you do it."

"Oh, yes," she replied confidently, but when she tried to push the bit between the horse's lips, the creature stood there like a dummy, with lips and teeth tightly closed. It wasn't so simple after all.

"Not that way," said Kent kindly. "See, take the bridle so. That's right. Now. . . ." In went the bit; the rest was easy. Phyllis beamed her contentment and turned to lift the saddle off the rail—her beautiful brand-new saddle.

"Wait a minute, please."

She turned to see Kent taking off the bridle she had just put on. "We'll do it again."

"Isn't it right?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, it's right, but that time I helped you. Besides, you know the old adage, 'Practice makes perfect.' "

Not once more did he make her do it, but twice, three times, until she was sure they would never get off on the ride, and her vexation returned. But he seemed not to notice, just took for granted that she wanted to learn. It was the same thing with the saddle. It had to be girthed over and over again before Kent declared himself satisfied.

"I understand all about it now," declared Phyllis impatiently as she buckled the last strap. "That's enough, isn't it?"

"I'd just like to see you do the whole thing once more, and this time without any help," he replied, stripping off saddle and bridle.

"Oh, very well, if you must." She let her voice show her exasperation. But it had no effect on her hardhearted instructor, who watched her go through her lesson in silence. She even imagined he was amused at her temper. And that made her more indignant.

I just wish Berry had come instead, she thought angrily. He wouldn't make all this fuss.

But Berry and Kent were two very different people, as she was constantly finding out. Kent had exact ideas about

how things should be done and when they should be done, whereas Berry was easygoing and inclined to be a bit sketchy.

"First rate. Now you've got it," declared Kent as she finished the job. "Another day you must learn how to harness a horse," he added good-naturedly.

"What a treat!" Phyllis just managed to hold back the words. Still, his commendation pleased her, and her ill-humor, which never lasted long, evaporated while she got into her habit. First came the long trousers of dark green broadcloth, strapped under the instep; then the queer-shaped skirt, with bulges for the pommels, and finally the padded and fitted bodice, buttoned closely down the front and fastened to the skirt by big hooks.

Turning this way and that before the mirror, she surveyed herself with satisfaction. Then pulling a stitched hat into place, she picked up gauntlets and whip, gathered her long skirt in one hand, and ran outdoors.

Kent was waiting, the reins of his own horse, Gray Lady, over his arm. He had changed, too, and was wearing the white doeskin breeches in which she had first seen him. He looked so nice that Phyllis forgave him for everything. She turned quickly to her horse, gathered up the reins and laid her hand on the pommel.

"I do know how to mount," she cried, put a foot in his hand and sprang lightly into the saddle.

Kent adjusted the stirrup length and pulled her skirt straight. "Nervous?" he asked.

"Not a bit."

"Then off we go." He flung his leg over Gray Lady, and the two horses walked off side by side.

Phyllis felt very high up in the air, but secure enough as she clutched the two pommels between her knees. "Can't we go a little faster?" she asked after they had covered half a mile at a foot pace.

"Yes, we can," Kent replied, "if you think you would like to. Just touch Topsy with the whip and at the same time lift her gently with the reins."

Phyllis did so, and Topsy broke from a walk into a lope. It was an easy motion, but still . . . but still . . . it did seem to make one a little breathless!

"I suppose you're more accustomed to trotting," remarked Kent, "but the lope suits this rough ground better."

"I'm not much a—accustomed to anything," panted Phyllis. The exercise was bringing the color into her cheeks; her eyes shone. She was feeling glorious. "But I like this much better than trot-t-trotting. Let's ride twenty miles!" she cried, thinking of what Constable Taylor had said.

Kent laughed outright. "I'd pity you tomorrow if we did."

They slowed to a walk and he showed her how to rein on the neck instead of using the bit to turn the horse this way or that.

"You sit as if you'd ridden all your life."

"Do I really?" Phyllis glowed at this praise. "Can we come out again tomorrow?"

"We might squeeze in a short ride tomorrow, if you're not too stiff."

By the time Phyllis had been out three times she felt herself thoroughly experienced and began to tease to be allowed to try the other horses. "I'm sure I could ride Turvey," she insisted.

But Kent only looked down on her with that gentle amused smile that always made her feel like a little girl, and shook his head. "You've a lot to learn yet. Topsy's pretty reliable, but even she will shy if she's startled. Still" —he turned to Berry—"I think we might risk her taking Topsy out alone now, don't you?"

Berry was sure of it. So every afternoon, as soon as the tiresome dishes were washed, and sometimes before, Phyllis saddled Topsy, and they went loping down the trail. She loved it and urged the horse on faster and faster. It exhilarated her to feel the big space all around her and to breathe the wonderful crystal air. One day, when she was tearing along, her eyes on the fleecy cumulus clouds climbing the sky, Topsy did shy and nearly unseated her. But a quick grab at the pommel and she managed to regain her balance. For a moment she was scared. But that passed, and soon she was telling herself that if she wasn't thrown when Topsy gave a great jump like that, why it showed she could sit anything.

Every time she saw Turvey, Topsy's mate, she felt a willful desire to ride him. He was a handsome horse, held his head well and had a look of speed. But her hints fell on barren ground. Neither Berry nor Kent would give her any encouragement. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep off Turvey," her brother told her. "He may be the same color as Topsy and the same height, but there the resemblance ends."

"If anything startles him, he's apt to buck," added Kent. "He isn't the horse for you at all."

"It's all nonsense," she muttered to herself, "this saying all the time that he's dangerous. The creature never does anything. Just a little fresh at starting sometimes."

Having begun to argue in this way, it wasn't long before she persuaded herself that it would be a good lark to fool them and try. She wouldn't say anything beforehand, of course, but she'd have a grand story to tell them at supper-time. Then they would realize how ridiculously cautious they had been, and Kent would see that she was grown up and able to take care of herself.

The opportunity came one day when the two men were plowing at the far end of the farm and quite out of sight. By good luck, too, Turvey was in his stall instead of loose in the pasture. Phyllis did feel a moment's qualm as she led him out, and looked guiltily round to see whether she was observed, but the chickens in the barnyard were the only witnesses.

Saddle and bridle were quickly put on. Mounting, how-

ever, was something of a problem, for Turvey never liked to stand still. As soon as she was up she flung her knee over the pommel and thrust her foot into the stirrup, ready for anything. Turvey sidled about and pushed down against the bit, but as soon as she gave him his head, he surprised her by cantering off quite peacefully. Now she was riding him, she thought triumphantly. Now she was doing it. A wave of exultation swept over her. Why, Turvey was behaving perfectly, better than he often did when Berry rode him.

"He knows he has a lady on his back," she thought wisely. "Some horses do, or perhaps I just don't excite him so much." She looked forward to telling about her adventure at suppertime.

Off in the distance a thin column of smoke was visible. "Joe Perkins is baking his bread," she thought. Joe was the mysterious bachelor neighbor—only a mile away by crow flight, but much more by trail—who wouldn't come over any more "now there was a woman in the house." Just for fun, to see what he would do, she had sent him a cake by Berry one day, and now it occurred to her that it would be a good idea to ride across and surprise him. But the prairie was too rough and hummocky—even without the badger holes—to be safe for a horse.

Thinking of Joe and how surprised he would be if she suddenly appeared in front of his shack, she absentmindedly kicked out a foot to straighten her skirt. As though she had touched a button, Turvey bounded off the

trail; his head went down, his back went up; he whirled round and round while he seesawed up and down. Phyllis's hat flew off and her whip dropped from her hand. She clutched the pommel. She grabbed for the horse's mane. In vain. She was slipping. She felt herself going. If he didn't stop right now, she'd be off. He didn't stop; instead, he gave a prodigious leap to one side, and off she slid, landing plump on her back on the hard ground. Turvey lashed out, just missing her, and was off, bucking joyfully as he went.

Slowly Phyllis got to her feet. She put her hands to her head, which was aching violently from the jar of the fall. She had a horrid sick feeling and trembled so much that she abruptly sat down again. As soon as her head felt a little more as if it belonged to her, she struggled up and looked round for her horse.

But Turvey was out of sight, and even if he had been right there, she doubted whether she would have had the courage to get onto his back. She felt very shaky, but there was nothing for it but to foot it home—two long miles. The sun was hot, and as she walked, the padded bodice of her habit stuck to her and the long skirt clung to her legs. At last, in exasperation, she gathered the skirt up round her waist and marched on in her trousers. That was better. And anyhow, who was there to see!

But no sooner did she feel a little easier in her body than her mind began to be busy with unpleasant thoughts. What had happened to Turvey? He might be miles away,

and with the saddle still on his back. Suppose he tried to roll and ruined it! Suppose he caught his foot in the reins and threw himself, and was lying somewhere with a broken leg! Even if he goes straight home, she thought glumly, he'll give the whole show away. There'll be no hiding it. I'll have to tell. And instead of proving how clever she was, she'd just seem like a naughty little girl. She smarted with the humiliation of the inevitable confession.

The sight of a buckboard bowling along the trail toward her made her drop her skirt in a hurry. She screwed up her eyes against the sun. It looked like—yes, it *was* Kent. Oh, goodness, now for it!

Kent drew up alongside and regarded her anxiously. "Are you hurt?"

Phyllis shook her head. "Not much—just for the moment." She couldn't quite look him in the face. "I only . . . I only moved one foot"—she tried to justify herself —"and Turvey seemed to go mad."

"I can imagine it," replied Kent dryly. Then with relief in his voice, "Well, thank God things are no worse. A pretty fright I got when Turvey came galloping into the fold yard with an empty saddle. I thought you might have been killed." He cramped the wheel, and with downcast eyes Phyllis climbed in beside him.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "Berry did tell me not to, and so did you." As Kent made no reply, she added, "I ought to have had more sense." The tears were coming now. She tried vainly to hold them back. A sniff, another

sniff, but do what she would one rolled down her cheek and into her mouth.

She could not see the kindness in Kent's face as he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. "Take this," he said more gently than he had yet spoken, "and don't cry. It's all over now. But you won't give me another scare like that, will you?"

"No, I won't," she promised, venturing for the first time to look up at him, and feeling the load of guilt lighter every minute. "I'll wait until you say I may before I get onto another horse."

CHAPTER V

"Was I a Fool to Come?"

Six o'clock! Time to get up already! Phyllis yawned and rubbed her eyes. Slowly and reluctantly she turned out of the warm bed. As soon as her feet touched the floor she realized that she was very, very stiff. Then she remembered why—the fall off Turvey yesterday!

Rather painfully she drew off her nightgown. There was a bruise on one thigh as big as a saucer, another on her shoulder, and the skin was off her elbow.

Dressing was an awkward business. First the chemise—getting into it was hard enough, but stepping into the long white cambric drawers was worse. Then came her stays clasped down the front, and the embroidery-trimmed corset cover that fitted her round figure like a glove. Those went on easily enough. But her short petticoat, her long petticoat, and her cotton dress had to be pulled over her head one by one, and every movement hurt.

"I suppose it serves me right." She made a grimace at herself in the glass as she dropped her watch into her watch pocket and turned to the door. "Still, I'm lucky. He might have kicked me." As she stirred the morning

porridge, she determined to make amends for her foolishness by being very sensible.

The mood lasted all morning. To prove her resolve she gave the kitchen a thorough cleaning, washing the lamp chimneys until they shone, polishing the stove, and even going down on her hands and knees to scrub the floor. The movements hurt her, but she took a certain satisfaction in the discomfort.

There was no riding that afternoon. Riding for the moment was out of favor. Instead, when dinner was over she got out her paintbox. Handling the colors for the first time in so many weeks was like meeting a lot of old friends. What happy times she had had with those paints at home! What wonderful sketching expeditions with her father! Off the two of them would go, all the stuff loaded in the pony cart, sometimes into the forest for a "wood interior," sometimes to the meadows for a river landscape.

Daddy always made her choose her own subject, but when they met for sandwiches at noon, he would criticize her sketch and send her off for the afternoon's work with a whole stock of new ideas. Nobody could ever be such a wonderful comrade as Daddy.

There wasn't much to paint here. Just flatness wherever you looked. But those great rolling clouds with the line of prairie beneath—they could be a subject. Or should she make a sketch of the house to send to Uncle Henry and Aunt Lydia? She decided on the house.

Phyllis crossed the creek on the two-plank bridge and

set up her easel on the opposite bank where the anemone slope would make a good foreground. But no sooner had she turned to open her paintbox than a gust of wind blew the easel over. She tried working the legs into the ground, but this was unsuccessful. "If only I had a stone to prop it," she thought. But she knew better by now than to look for a stone on the prairie. Confound it all, how could anyone paint in this everlasting wind! She gave up the easel as hopeless and stretched herself out in a saucer-shaped depression that Berry had told her was an old buffalo wallow. It was awkward, stiff as she was, trying to paint lying down, but she managed somehow and was so absorbed in her effort that she did not notice that the sun had gone in until a big drop of rain fell on her paper. It was the first raindrop she had seen since she landed in Canada.

The great rolling clouds she had admired had become black and threatening, and before she could pick herself up and gather her painting things together, the rain was coming down in sheets. Her thin dress, wet through long before she reached the shelter of the house, stuck to her shoulders, and the poor sketch—it might have had a sponge rubbed across it! Never had Phyllis seen such rain. The wind caught and hurled it at the windows with a noise like the rolling of drums. It fascinated her. She stood watching the downpour until she suddenly felt herself shivering, and hastened to her bedroom to take off her wet things.

A disagreeable surprise awaited her. The new roof was

leaking. Drip-drip came the rain—right down onto the rug. Phyllis moved the rug and set down her hand basin to catch the water. It was all she could think of to do. Things were worse in the kitchen; little pools of water had collected here and there on the floor, and were gradually growing larger. She mopped them up, but they quickly grew again. And still the floods swept down the windowpane.

Berry and Kent came up cheerful, saying the rain was just what was needed. Already great clods of mud, inches thick, clung to their boots. Although they shook and scraped them outside, enough mud stuck to complete the ruin of the nice clean floor. They whistled when they saw half a dozen pots and pans set down, and declared they were poor carpenters, but with a new roof you never could tell! The state the kitchen was in did not upset them in the least.

Two days and nights the rain lasted, and all the time the wind blew and howled about the house, and the temperature fell lower and lower. The kitchen was the only warm spot in the house, but what a mess that was in! Phyllis thought she had never seen such a dismal-looking place. She could not make up her mind whether to freeze in the sitting room, which at least was dry, or to be miserable, but fairly warm, in the dark, muddy—yes, muddy—kitchen. It would take a hoe, nothing less, to clean that floor!

In midmorning of the second day, Berry appeared at

the back door. "Give me a light, Phyl. I don't want to come in with these boots."

Phyllis picked her way over to him with the matches. "Isn't this awful, Berry? Won't it ever stop?"

"Awful? Why, it's magnificent! Every hour's rain just now is dollars in our pockets."

"What do I care about dollars," she grumbled. "I say it *is* awful. Such a mess." Phyllis's face was as gloomy as the weather.

Berry's eyes rested on her consideringly. "It is a bit hard on you, I suppose. But it's pretty important to us both for this farm to be a success. Look at it that way." He put a finger under her chin so that she had to look up. "Who's the girl, anyhow, who said she didn't mind roughing it? Cheer up. It will be dry enough to suit anyone before long." And off he went, whistling.

Phyllis envied him. She almost wished she were a man and had to be out in it, too. It would be more fun than sticking around the dreary house like this, trying to think of something she wanted to do. She couldn't settle down to read; she didn't want to sew. Perhaps she could paint a still life. Listlessly she arranged a group of books and flowers, moving them this way and that until the composition pleased her. But it was no good. She couldn't put her heart into it. How different a rainy day at home had been. That had meant curling up in a big chair with a book, or putting on your waterproof and heavy boots and taking a jolly walk through the lanes, and then coming home to a

cosy tea in front of the open fire. Even at school there was the gymnasium, and at Aunt Lydia's there was her nice big bedroom. Here were no lanes, no gym, no open fire, and nobody of course to come in for tea.

Was I a fool to come here? For the first time a doubt entered her mind. Was I crazy to give up the art school and everything? A pang of homesickness shot through her. She flung herself down on the sofa and covered her eyes with her hand.

I could go back. The thought flashed and was gone.

Berry needs me here. I told him I'd come for good and all. He said we two must stick together.

But I didn't know it would be like this. Perhaps Uncle Henry would send me the money.

But— Oh, Berry, what shall I do?

Her mind swung back and forth. Presently, weary of thinking, she drew the knitted afghan over her, and a few minutes later was fast asleep.

A knocking at the front door wakened her. She sprang up and rubbed her eyes. Who could it be? Nobody ever came. Another knock, louder this time. Hurriedly she straightened the robe and ran her fingers through her hair. Then she opened the door.

A strange figure stood there. Hardly more than five feet tall and slightly bowlegged. Dark eyes as bright and quick as a bird's looked into Phyllis's face. Indeed, the man's whole face was hawklike. Phyllis noticed that his overalls,

made evidently for someone much bigger, were turned back almost to the knees. In the same glance she realized that he stood against a background of sunshine. While she had been asleep the rain had ceased.

The little man swept off his cap. "The lady of the cake!" Only he pronounced it "lydy" and "cyke." His accent was the purest cockney.

It was Joe Perkins! It must be. This small person just fitted Berry's description. And that reference to a cake!

Phyllis asked him in, settled him comfortably with his pipe, and assured him that ever since she had first seen his chimney smoke in the distance, she had been hoping he would come over.

"I see I've made a mistake, miss, in staying away so long," he replied gallantly. "But, you see, I'm a bit of an 'ermit."

"A nermit?" asked Phyllis, wondering what that could be.

"Yes, miss, an 'ermit." This time she caught his meaning.

"Well, I'm glad you stopped being one for this afternoon," she replied, her eyes twinkling. "But tell me, won't you, Mr. Perkins, why you want to be a hermit?"

Joe took two or three meditative puffs before he replied. "If you're interested, miss, I don't mind. It was this way. All my life I'd lived in London, you see, in a crowded dis-

trict where we was packed in like sardines in a can, as you might say. And I come to 'ave a longing to be off somewhere by myself, with lots of spyce around me. You understand wot I mean, miss?" He looked at her from beneath bushy eyebrows, and Phyllis nodded.

"Yes, I think I understand."

"Well," the little man went on, "by the time I was forty, and me still a bachelor, I'd saved a bit of money. One spring mornin' when the sun was shining bright down the street"—he waved his pipe around an imaginary sky—"and a barrel organ was playing fit to bust, something seemed to 'appen inside me. 'Joe,' I says to myself, 'do you mean to spend your 'ole life sitting cross-legged with a needle in your 'and, when there's a world to see, and you'll be dead someday without 'aving seen nothing but the East End of London?' That very day, miss"—he took the pipe out of his mouth and looked at her impressively—"I went to the steamship offices and took passage to Canada. And 'ere I am!" He leaned back, five feet of pure contentment.

"And have you ever been sorry?" Phyllis asked. Joe's adventure seemed even bigger than her own.

"Me? Never. I'm my own man 'ere. I 'aven't much, and I don't need much."

"Did you come here straight from London, like me?"

"Not quite, miss. I hired out to a farmer for six months first. That poor chap," he chortled. " 'Ow glad he must 'ave been to get shut of me. But I learned a thing or two. Now, wot with chickens and vegetables—things most

people don't bother with—I myke out very well—not to mention the wild duck and prairie chicken."

"But they're not in season now, are they?" she asked innocently.

"No, miss, not in season. But Indians can shoot anytime as long as they don't sell, and I figure I must be a bit of an Indian." He gave her a friendly wink.

Phyllis laughed. This queer little man was fun, and what could have made Berry say he'd never come any more.

"I can cook 'em to the queen's taste, too," Joe went on, still talking of wild game. "But I never tried my 'and at a cyke, miss. So that there one you sent over was a rare treat. Very kind of you, to be sure."

"You'll stay and have supper with us, won't you, Mr. Perkins?" said Phyllis as Joe stood up as though to take leave.

He accepted promptly. "But I want to see Mr. Averill about a small matter of business, so I'll be back later, that being agreeable to you."

As they strolled together along the garden fence, Joe said suddenly, "How would you like a few black currant bushes, miss? They grow fine if you give 'em plenty of room."

"Black currants!" exclaimed Phyllis. "Why, they'd be a treasure, but I didn't know they ever grew wild."

"There's places I know in the valley where you can find 'em—red rasps, too."

"How wonderful. And we hardly ever see fruit. If you'll

get me some of the bushes, I'll make you all the cakes you like."

Joe lifted his battered cap. "It's a bargain, miss."

He strode off, bowlegs and all, but turned back to say, "I've a few rhubarb roots, too, miss, sent me from England. I'll bring a couple over when I bring the currant bushes. But not my earthworms!" he added with a quick shake of the head.

"Your earthworms!" exclaimed Phyllis blankly.

"Yes, miss, they came with the rhubarb roots—the only pair of earthworms in the 'ole of the Northwest."

"I wouldn't rob you for the world," she cried gaily, "especially as gardening is so much pleasanter without them."

"Well, someday p'raps my pair will 'replenish the earth' as the Bible says." The little man put his head on one side and shot a droll glance at the girl. "You wouldn't like me to bring 'em over to see you, miss? They're real pets. I race 'em across the table of a Sunday. The little one generally wins."

Phyllis burst out laughing. "Yes, do! We'll make bets."

She looked after Joe almost with affection as he took his way to the barnyard. "He's a real friend," she mused. "Suppose I'd met him in a London street, I'd never in the world have noticed him. But here! . . ."

Still smiling to herself, she turned back to the house and suddenly realized that all her discontent and homesickness had vanished. Is it the sunshine? she wondered. Or is

it that cheerful little man? I can't imagine his getting discouraged the way I do. And off by himself in that shack with nothing but chickens for company! . . . "Phyllis my girl," she said out loud, "you're a bit of a baby still. Take shame to yourself."

CHAPTER VI

Those "Black, Attractive" MacDonalds

"Come on, Berry, be an angel," pleaded Phyllis. She hung onto her brother's arm as he reached for his hat. "Let me go with you today. I want to drive the hayrake. I don't want to be left here all alone again. This is the third day, and it's so dull."

"What about that ironing? I need a shirt pretty badly."

Phyllis pouted. "I'll do it tomorrow, really and truly I will."

"It will be as hot as blazes in the valley," Berry objected. "You'll just be tired out."

"No, I won't. Honestly I won't." She turned to Kent who was cutting thick sandwiches of bread and cold meat at the kitchen table. "*You* say I can go, he'll listen to you. Please. *Please.*"

His reply was to Berry. "Why not, if she wants to so much. She doesn't have to keep at it all day, I suppose."

Phyllis did a little dancing step. She knew the battle was won. "Thank you, thank you," she chanted, and blew a kiss to Kent's retreating back as the two men disappeared in the direction of the stable. To go haying would be a thousand times more fun than ironing. Besides, she had

been on the farm a whole month now and hadn't yet seen the celebrated Qu'Appelle Valley, though it was only ten miles away. She was wild to see it, and hear the echo—"Who calls?"—for which the valley had been named.

Singing happily, she rushed through the dishes and was all ready when the wagon drove up to the door with Turvey tied behind.

"I believe you're fooling," said Phyllis an hour later from her perch between the two men on the spring seat. "I don't believe there is any valley. Here we've been driving all this time and there isn't a sign of it yet."

"Just you wait," replied Berry. "It'll surprise you."

And sure enough, suddenly it opened out before them. One minute there was nothing to be seen but prairie, and the next, there it was at their feet. Kent reined in the horses for Phyllis to have a good look. Far below, she saw the floor of the valley as level and as green as a billiard table—a billiard table a mile wide. And in the midst of it a river.

"It looks like a thin blue ribbon someone threw down," she cried. Trees covered the hills. Oh, lovely to see trees again! The rustling of the poplar leaves delighted her. She clapped her hands when a flock of goldfinches darted out of a nearby maple.

"Why, think of staying at home when I could come here!" she exclaimed.

As Kent picked up the reins he pointed out two houses across the river. The brown one, he told her, was the post

office for the valley, where they got their mail. "And that other one—see the white one among the trees—that's the MacDonalds' place. You'll know them before long. Now look the other way," he went on, "off to the left where the grass is cut. That's where we're haying."

He clucked to the horses and they started cautiously down the long winding trail to the valley bottom. It was so steep in places that Phyllis expected every minute to see the horses sit down and slide. She braced her feet against the dashboard and hung onto Berry.

"Don't be scared," Kent reassured her. "They're used to it. Horses get to be a good deal like cats in this country."

"I hope they don't climb trees," she murmured, taking a firmer grip on her brother's arm.

As soon as they arrived at the hayfield, Phyllis wanted to begin work. She hovered about impatiently while the horses were taken out and hitched to the mowing machine. Turvey was to pull the hayrake, and the raking was to be her job.

Berry helped her onto the iron seat, showed her how to raise and lower the lever, and told her what part of the field to begin on.

"Turvey won't give you any trouble today," he said. "He's always good in harness—it's only in the saddle that he has his little tantrums."

"I'm not afraid," she asserted as she drove off in triumph, her big straw hat tied firmly under her chin, her blue cotton skirt ballooning out in the breeze.

Kent and Berry looked after her, amused at her enthusiasm. "Quite a farmer we have here," said the former, "but a bit too decorative for the part. Still. . . ."

Phyllis was determined to do a good job. Carefully following instructions, she raked the drying hay into long windrows, taking pride in getting them evenly spaced, and with every breath enjoying the fragrance the rake stirred up. Down here, in the valley, the sun was fiercely hot. But she didn't care. Now and then, when her route brought her near one or other of the men, she waved and halloed, but did not stop. Lifting the lever was hard work, and what with the effort and the heat and the hardness of the iron seat, she was pretty well tired by noon and not sorry when a halt was called for lunch.

"How did I do?" She lifted a flushed face, hoping for a bit of praise—and got it at once.

"A fine job," said Kent heartily. "I didn't suppose you could stick it out so long."

Her eyes brightened with pleasure. "Oh, I mean to work all day, the same as you two."

Nevertheless it was refreshing to sit in the shade, propped up against a tree, for the lunch hour. They ate the sandwiches and drank cold tea with gusto, Phyllis doing her full share. Afterward, she lay on her back, resting and watching the birds dart in and out of the leafy branches. There was a comfortable silence, which was broken by Phyllis asking suddenly, "Who are these MacDonalds?"

"They're black Highlanders," replied Berry promptly, "all three—father, son, and daughter. Attractive as all get out, but a bit queer at times. Don't you think so, Kent?"

"Oh, they're all right," replied Kent sleepily. "In fact, as you said, there's something darned attractive about them. Flora—" He broke off.

Phyllis wondered what he had been going to say. At a guess, he admired the daughter. She was curious to know more about these "black, attractive" MacDonalds.

She was to see them sooner than she expected.

Driving the hayrake was harder work than it had been in the morning. The sun was hotter and the breeze had died down to almost nothing. Phyllis's arms ached and her back was tired, but she was determined not to be a quitter. Turvey was restless, too, and took more driving than in the earlier hours of the day. She could not trust him to follow a line.

Suddenly out of the hay at his feet, a snake reared up. Turvey shied violently and began to run, the rake jerking and jolting behind him. Pull as she might on the reins, Phyllis could not control him, and as one wheel struck a hummock, she was bounced right out of the seat and onto the ground. She lit with such force that for a minute she lay stunned. When she opened her eyes, she found both men bending anxiously over her. There was a look of such concern on Kent's face that she was almost startled. It was only a flash and gone again, but more than once in the following days the recollection puzzled her.

"I'm all right," she said gamely. "Where's Turvey?" She tried to sit up, but sank back with a groan.

"What is it, Phyl? Where are you hurt?" cried Berry. "That brute!" His blue eyes blazed as he shook his fist at the trembling horse, now safely tied to a wagon wheel.

"It's nothing—just my back. I'll get up in a minute."

Kent brought her some of the cold tea and she drank thirstily. Ah, that tasted good. "Don't look so serious, you two," she begged. "I tell you it's nothing." But when at last she was on her feet she could hardly straighten up, but tottered about with a hand on the end of her spine.

"That's twice for Master Turvey, isn't it?" She looked up with a wry smile. "Never mind, some day I'll get the upper hand with him."

"That's the stuff." Kent laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. Then he turned to Berry. "We'd better get her into the wagon and take her to MacDonalds'." Without more ado he lifted her in his arms and laid her on the hay with which the wagon was already partly filled.

"I want to go home," she insisted. "I'll be all right." But when they had covered the mile between the hayfield and the MacDonalds' place, she was willing, in spite of her soft nest in the hay, to be persuaded not to travel further.

An hour later she was safely tucked into Flora MacDonald's bed, wearing Flora's nightgown and bed jacket, and that young lady was assiduously sponging her face and

hands and combing back her tangled hair. As she worked, her tongue was not idle.

"You must have had an awful bump. It's a good thing you had someone like Mr. Averill at hand to look after you. He lifted you out of the wagon, didn't he?"

"Indeed he did, and into it, too. He was awfully kind—they both were."

"Yes, Berry, too—he's so good-looking, don't you think? My, but you're the lucky girl to have two men like that with you all the time! Your brother seemed terribly concerned. I don't believe Alec"—and here she laughed—"would make such a fuss over me if I had a tumble. There," she added, as she retied the ribbon on Phyllis's hair and stood back to survey the result, "you look lovely. Now you just lie back and rest and in a few minutes I'll bring you a cup of tea and some Scotch shortbread I made this morning. Would you like that?"

"But it's giving you so much trouble. I'm a regular nuisance."

"Not a bit. Now I'll just run out and say good-by for you to Berry and Mr. Averill and tell them that you're going to be all right, and then I'll be back with the tea."

Phyllis, left alone and listening to the voices in the hall, wished she could have said good-by for herself, but she was impressed by Flora's efficiency and grateful for her care. It had not escaped her that Flora had called Berry

"Berry," but had not used the first name in speaking of Kent. Still, there had been a sort of respectful admiration in her voice which wasn't in the least there in commenting on Berry's good looks. Phyllis wondered which of the two Flora really thought the most of.

How thin Flora was, she reflected, as she lay back on the pillows—and how brown. But the rich color under her tan was lovely. And what eyes! Dark and gleaming and fringed with the longest, blackest lashes Phyllis had ever seen. The whole family seemed to have those extraordinary eyes, even the son, of whom she had caught a glimpse as she was helped into the house. Mr. MacDonald, the father, and a stiff-faced aunt who apparently lived with them, had been most kind, but it was Flora who took the situation in hand and settled everything before Phyllis fairly knew where she was!

Everything seemed very quiet after the fuss. There wasn't a sound in the house, or any sound outdoors except the rustling of a poplar in the breeze. It was almost lonely. Phyllis's thoughts turned to the men on their homeward way. She hated being left behind, but when she tried to sit up, her back reminded her sharply that she was better off where she was. With a sigh she let her eyes wander through the French windows to the lawn, set about with its trees, and to the valley and river beyond. She could see Mr. MacDonald stretched out in a deck chair in the shade of a maple, and amused herself by watching him

smoke and turn the pages of his book. Attractive? Yes, he certainly was—interesting-looking. The black moustache and side whiskers and the heavy eyebrows made his pale face seem all the paler. She wondered where the "queerness" came in.

From watching Mr. MacDonald, she turned to examine the room in which she lay. It was interesting, too—vivid, like Flora herself. Its draperies, instead of being white dotted swiss as in her own little room, were in stripes of scarlet and white, and on the walls hung water-color sketches, some unframed, in which clear, bright colors predominated. Phyllis, who had grown up in an atmosphere of art, knew at once that those sketches were unusual. She felt curiously drawn to Flora, who was so striking and seemed so clever and efficient, but at the same time rather shy with her. Why, she did not know, unless it was something startling in those strange eyes.

It was noon of the next day before she was allowed to get up. Berry and Kent had called on their way to the hayfield, but had been told by Flora quite peremptorily that the patient must stay where she was for another day. Phyllis had no objection, though in reality, as she told Berry, she felt almost well.

So here she was, propped up with cushions in the deck chair under the trees, and being made much of by Flora, who looked more striking than ever in a dress of dark-blue linen. The bodice fitted closely to her spare figure, and the full skirt, innocent of the fashionable pleats and drapes,

ended halfway between knee and ankle. There was a frill of some thin stuff round the neck and a row of small red buttons down the front—that was all. Smart, very, Phyllis admitted, but rather daring, with that short skirt!

The midday meal was over and the whole family had adjourned outdoors to have a cup of tea in the open. These MacDonald men didn't seem to rush back to work, like Berry and Kent. Or perhaps they were just being polite to a visitor.

Phyllis found Mr. MacDonald charming. He was full of interest in her doings, asked her about her school, her friends in England, and how she liked prairie life. It seemed easy to talk to him, and she quite enjoyed telling him about her old home on the Thames, about the boating parties they used to have, and the excitement when her father's paintings were being packed up to go to an exhibition in London.

Alec, the grown-up son, was very quiet and sat drinking his tea and hardly saying a word. In spite of this difference, no one could doubt but that he was one of the "black, attractive" MacDonalds.

Aunt Christie was the odd one of the family. Her sandy-gray hair was pulled straight back from a face that wore a somewhat grim expression. Phyllis guessed that she did the more disagreeable jobs in the household. When Mr. MacDonald told Flora to fetch his violin and he would "play Miss Phyllis some of our Highland airs," Aunt Christie objected that it was already past two o'clock.

"Nay, nay, Christie lass, there's time enough." Mr. MacDonald sometimes used the Scotch in speaking to his sister. "And we don't often have a charming young leddy to visit us."

They spent an hour—a delightful one to Phyllis—in the shade of the big maple, listening to Mr. MacDonald as he played old Highland tunes and told the stories that lay behind them. Then, rather abruptly, he laid aside the violin, said, "Well, Alec," and the two men with a bow to Phyllis disappeared in the direction of the barnyard.

Flora roused herself. "If we are to have wild rasps for supper, I must go after them." She rearranged the pillows behind Phyllis's back, refusing to let the patient stir to help her pick berries, and disappeared down the hill toward the river, swinging her basket as she went.

Phyllis was not sorry to be left alone. It was lovely to lie under the trees, watching the birds. It was a rare luxury just to recline like this at her ease, with no duties. Nevertheless, her thoughts kept turning homeward. How were they getting on without her? Who cooked the dinner? Which one washed the dishes? Did they sweep the kitchen and remember to fill the water barrel? She smiled, reminding herself that, after all, they had managed before she came.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Flora insisted on tucking her into bed early, although Phyllis declared herself perfectly well again. Indeed, she felt so well the next morning that it was a disappointment when Berry

and Kent called not to be allowed to go with them to the hay meadows. The hours seemed long until her two men reappeared about four o'clock, and with many expressions of gratitude to the MacDonald family, carried her off with them.

CHAPTER VII

The Musical Ride of the Northwest Mounted Police

Since the day Phyllis met Constable Taylor she had felt a curiosity to see the Northwest Mounted Police Post near Regina. So when Berry announced one day that he was going to talk to the commissioner about a contract for oats, she jumped at the opportunity to accompany him.

Berry left her at the commissioner's door, saying he would not be long, and that if the horses were restless she could drive round the parade ground. This she was much too shy to attempt and felt thankful to Topsy and Turvey for standing so quietly. Berry was right—his business was soon over and the two men came out together.

"By the way," said the commissioner after the introductions were over, "we have a musical ride this afternoon. Perhaps Miss Vernon would be interested in seeing it."

An officer was sent for and introduced as Inspector Chambers. Two minutes later he was escorting the brother and sister across the parade ground to the riding school. The Union Jack was streaming out against a blue sky. It thrilled Phyllis to feel that here in this far-off country, she was still under the familiar flag. A bugler appeared

and standing by the flagpole blew a silver call. At once the square, empty before, became lively with red-coated figures.

"First call for the ride," remarked the inspector, who was very young and blushed every time he spoke to Phyllis. In response to her questions, he pointed out the stables, the guardhouse, the officers' quarters, and the men's barracks.

They were passing the last barrack building when they almost ran into a solitary constable hurrying out as though he were late. He stepped aside to salute the officer. Then his eyes lighted on Phyllis, and opened wide in surprise. The ghost of an audacious grin spread across his face, and he saluted again. That boyish grin! Phyllis would have recognized it anywhere as belonging to her acquaintance of the station platform. She had hardly time to smile back when they had passed on. But when she looked back over her shoulder she could see he was still staring after them, and she felt oddly pleased.

The balcony of the riding school was filling up, but the inspector found them seats in the front row, then excused himself, murmuring something about being officer of the day. He had hardly gone when there was a whoop behind them and Peter Tilton dropped into a seat beside Berry. Mary was close behind him. Phyllis jumped to her feet when she caught sight of her new friend. "What luck!" the two girls exclaimed together as they shook hands.

"Where do I come in?" Berry neatly detached Mary

from his sister and set her down beside him. "You can have Phyllis on the other side, if you like."

Mary looked from one to the other with her happy smile. "Shall I tell you who people are?" she asked Phyllis. "Though of course Berry knows just as well as I do. Still, girls must always do the talking, mustn't they?" She quirked the corners of her lips at the young man. "Anyhow, that's the wife of the lieutenant governor just coming in, the one in the dowdy hat. The gentleman with her in plain clothes is the Indian Commissioner, and the officer's the adjutant of the post.

"Oh, there's Mrs. Thomson," Mary broke off to exclaim. She waved a friendly hand across the aisle. "You don't know her yet, Phyllis, but you will. She's lots of fun, isn't she, Berry?"

The lady in question saw them and bustled over. She was plump and pretty, and the roses in her bonnet were hardly brighter than the roses in her cheeks. "Well, young Berry," she exclaimed in a loud hearty voice, easily overheard by people in nearby seats, "so this is the beautiful sister you've been expecting."

Phyllis blushed her ready blush. She was embarrassed by this public praise, pleasant as it was to be thought beautiful.

"Well, now, this is lucky," Mrs. Thomson went on cordially. "We're having a little dance tonight and you'll be here for it. I'll look for you both about eight o'clock." She made ready to go back to her seat.

"That would be simply lovely, but"—Phyllis hesitated and looked at her brother—"I expect we shall have to go back this afternoon."

"Go back this afternoon!" ejaculated Mrs. Thomson. "My land, Berry Vernon, you can't drag your sister home to that old farm just when we have a chance to see her. Don't be absurd. I guess Mr. Averill will get along all right without you for once."

"Of course they will stay in town." Mary put her word in. "Mother has been expecting them for a visit every day since Phyllis arrived."

"I bow to the ladies." Berry did so with his hand on his heart. "Believe me, no allurement of cow or chicken shall draw me back to the farm this night."

"Idiot!" exclaimed Mrs. Thomson. "But you'll stay anyway."

Phyllis was delighted and not a little surprised that Berry should consent so easily. But a dance! "I'm afraid I didn't bring any evening things with me," she apologized, remembering she had left home without even a toothbrush.

"Why, that's a lovely dress you're wearing. Anyhow, this is just a little kick-up—nothing to make a fuss about. Dear knows, I haven't anything fit to wear. My last new dress was before Tommy was born, and that's a year ago. Well, I'll see you later. It's all settled."

She went back to her own party just as the commissioner entered and took his seat. Immediately the sound of

music was heard outside, and the band marched in playing a tune that made Phyllis's feet beat time. A bugle call pierced the distance.

"Here they come," cried Peter. A thrill seemed to pass through the onlookers and all eyes turned toward the entrance. The girls clutched one another and leaned forward.

In came the riders in single file. Lance in rest, they circled the tanbark. The horses' coats shone like satin, the lances glittered, the bits jingled. The scarlet of the uniforms, thought Phyllis, was like a trumpet note.

Halfway down the line came Constable Taylor. His eyes did not look between his horse's ears, as they ought to have done, but roved the balcony until they lighted on Phyllis, and again she experienced that odd little feeling of pleasure. But in a flash he was gone and, throughout the ride, did not look her way again.

The band struck up

> Ah, ah, Kafoozalum
> Kafoozalum, Kafoozalum,
> Ah, ah, Kafoozalum,
> The daughter of the barber

and the horses broke into a trot. The leading horse put his feet down in perfect time to the music. Round and round they went, pennants streaming from the lances, men sitting close to the saddle. Then the music changed, and without pausing they broke into different formations, weaving in and out in intricate patterns, the leader never

failing to mark time with his hoofs, however much he twisted and turned in obedience to the rein.

"Now they are going to dance a quadrille," said Mary, as the music changed once more.

Sixteen horses with their riders separated themselves from the rest, and forming two sets of eight, went through the figures of the dance.

Phyllis was enchanted. "Aren't they clever?" she cried. "Those lovely horses! Look at them setting to partners. What fun it must be. I'd love to try it, wouldn't you, Mary?"

Then came the stunts. Tent pegs were stuck into the ground, and down the arena came two men, riding furiously, and neatly picked them up on their lances. More pegs were driven in, two new riders thundered down and were equally successful. One of the two, Phyllis saw with a little thrill of pleasure, was Constable Taylor. The audience broke into cheers. The third couple did not fare so well. Only one carried off his peg; the other struck it a slanting blow that nearly lost him his lance.

"Not so easy as it looks," murmured Berry. There were other attempts, many fortunate ones, but none came off with quite the same precision as in the case of the first two couples.

After the tent-pegging the men gave an exhibition of throwing their horses and hiding behind them to shoot at an imaginary enemy. Some of the horses looked mildly surprised, Phyllis thought, at finding themselves on the

ground. One of them would not stay down, but kept raising his head and looking round so inquiringly that everyone laughed.

Then the bugle sounded again. Horses and men leaped to their feet and formed into single line. Riders and steeds once more circled the riding school, then disappeared through the gate to the strains of "The Girl I Left Behind Me." The musical ride was over.

An hour later the two girls, with arms round each other, were on their way upstairs at the Tiltons'. "We're both going to sleep in my room," said Mary. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, it will be fun. It does seem jolly to have a girl to talk to. Of course, there was Flora. She was wonderful to me, so kind"—Phyllis hesitated—"but somehow she seems different."

Mary agreed, adding that she never felt quite at home with Flora, herself. The girls were deep in a discussion of the MacDonald family when young Peter's voice came up from below. "Hi, you girls, aren't you ever going to stop talking? Supper's ready."

They were a jolly party at supper. Phyllis was kept so busy answering questions that Mrs. Tilton declared the poor girl hadn't a chance to eat a mouthful. The doctor said it was evident she was taking to farming like a duck to water.

"But what about the housekeeping? We don't hear so much about that." He looked at her quizzically.

Phyllis smiled rather sheepishly and admitted that she would rather milk the cow than wash the milk pails. "But it *is* fun getting meals," she declared stoutly—adding ruefully, "if only they didn't come quite so often."

Dr. Tilton burst out laughing and clapped her on the shoulder. "They'll keep on coming three times a day, my dear, so make up your mind to that."

By eight o'clock the three young people were knocking at the Thomsons' door. Mrs. Thomson kissed Mary and Phyllis heartily, praised Mary's dress, went into raptures over Phyllis's pink-and-white complexion, and called to her husband and several young men hovering about, to come over and be introduced. Mr. Thomson was a large blond man with a twinkle in his eye and a habit of saying, "*Now,* Maggie," in protest against his wife's exuberance.

He promptly took possession of Phyllis and, ignoring her protests that she did not dance very well, waltzed her out onto the floor. Before she knew it, Phyllis's careful dancing school steps were swept aside and she found herself whirled about with an energy and vim that almost literally took her off her feet.

Mr. Thomson seemed to understand her difficulty. "Not dance very well?" he said, looking down on her struggle to match her steps to his. "You're doing fine. Just forget that English conscientiousness, and you'll be all right. See?

Put your mind on the first step and let the others take care of themselves—*one,* two, three; *one,* two, three. That's the way we do it here."

Phyllis saw. She put her mind on the first step. She let the others take care of themselves. And almost at once she was surprised to find herself following her partner easily, even when he reversed. This was fun. This was wonderful. She loved the swing of it. And when the dance ended with a clash of chords from the piano, Mr. Thomson and she fell apart and stood looking triumphantly at each other.

"Apt pupil," he exclaimed. "We must have another. But later, for here comes Bennett expecting a turn. And anyway I promised to relieve him at the piano."

Bennett proved to be a curly-haired youth. "In the Indian Office, you know," he explained. "That big building out on the prairie, on the way to Government House. Ah, there's the music at last—a polka. Good."

This polka, again, was quite different from the English variety, as Phyllis quickly found. It was a rollicking sort of dance, very easy to learn and great fun. She danced it with spirit, her eyes shining and her feet in their pretty slippers kicking up beside her partner's patent leathers.

There was no lack of partners. One dance was no sooner over than there were two or three men clamoring for the next. Phyllis felt embarrassed at first, having to choose between so many applicants, especially when those not chosen pretended to be very much offended.

"Don't pay any attention to them," whispered Mr. Thomson in her ear. "Don't let them tease you."

Besides Mary and herself, there was only one other girl in the room—the daughter of Mr. Thomson's law partner, so Mr. Bennett told her. "And not very handy with her feet," he added ruefully, making a pretense of nursing a bruised ankle. "She's a nice girl, though," he added, "and plays a rattling good game of tennis."

The evening was well advanced when there was a stir at the door. A newcomer was arriving—a very young man in the scarlet tunic of the Northwest Mounted Police. He was small and dark, and a breeze seemed to follow him as he entered the room. Phyllis had no difficulty in recognizing her acquaintance of the station, the parade ground, the ride. Was he everywhere?

He lost no time in claiming her for a partner. They had a dance together, and a second, and then Phyllis found herself sitting tête à tête on the stairs while he confessed that he had been trying to figure out some way of seeing her ever since that morning at the station. "I made Mrs. Thomson promise to give me a chance, if she could. So this evening I got the word, and footed it right down," he finished blithely.

"I ought to be very much flattered." Phyllis's eyes twinkled. She was amused at his candid explanation, but a little thrilled, too. His dark eyes were so very expressive as he sat sideways on the stair, his arm stretched along behind her back.

"I've been wondering all the evening," she said, "how these various people came to be here in Regina. They were all somewhere else, probably doing something quite different, only a year or two ago. You, for instance. What made *you* enlist in the Mounted Police, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not the least bit in the world," he replied promptly, and without more ado began to pour out his life history. His father was Sir Mervyn Taylor, and he himself had been intended for the army. "But I guess I fooled away my time," he said, "and I failed my exams. The pater was pretty sore about it, and you can't blame him," he admitted handsomely. "Not but what he was awfully decent, considering. He didn't say much. What he did was to send me round the world with a tutor." For a moment the young man looked depressed. "It was disappointing Mother that I really cared about."

"If you were going round the world with a tutor, how did you come to be in the Mounted Police?" asked Phyllis, puzzled.

"I ran away from the tutor in Montreal," he replied briefly. "I determined if I couldn't be one kind of a soldier, I'd be another kind. So here I am, an enlisted man. I never minded that until this afternoon, and I couldn't speak to you because you were with an officer—darn him!"

Phyllis laughed out loud. He seemed such a boy, but after all such a delightful one. She wanted to know about

his duties, and how he enjoyed being in the Police.

"I'd like it fine if only I could get away from headquarters and start in doing some real work. It's the silly routine gets me down."

"Where do you want to go?" asked Phyllis. Headquarters seemed pretty thrilling to her.

"Anywhere away from Depot. In point of fact I've heard a rumor that I'm to go on detail with Sergeant Stewart soon, patrolling the valley."

Phyllis pricked up her ears. "We live near the valley," she remarked.

"Don't I know it! That's why I'm so keen for the detail to go through. It'll mean a chance to see you again. Say you want me to come," he coaxed.

"I'm sure my brother would be very pleased," she replied demurely.

"Aw, come now," he protested. "Won't *you* be pleased?"

For an answer she laughed and insisted that they must go back into the room. A new dance was beginning and Constable Taylor, with the best grace he could muster, offered his arm.

CHAPTER VIII

Constable Taylor Comes to Tea

"There, that's the last of you!" exclaimed Phyllis, as she gave a final rub to the last lamp and set it in its bracket over the kitchen table. She hung her oily rag behind the stove and sniffed her fingers distastefully. Filling the lamps was a hateful job, but if she didn't trim the wicks and wipe off the glass every day, they smelt horrible when they were lighted.

In the weeks that had passed since her visit to town, she had often thought of Dr. Tilton's jibe, "We don't hear so much about the housekeeping," and was honestly trying to take more interest in it. After all, though it was fun to try things like milking and plowing and forking hay, she wasn't really much help at them. And they did mean neglecting her proper work, that she had come out to Canada on purpose to do, to be a help to Berry.

Making the butter, for instance. Berry had always done it, but why should he? It was her job by rights, especially now, when the two men were working early and late harvesting the oats. She felt ashamed not to have thought of this before. "I ought to have watched him," she reproached herself. "I'll get him to tell me this very evening

just how to do it, and then tomorrow maybe I'll try my hand."

Then there was the laundry. She ought to do something about that instead of going on shirking the problem—for a problem it was, she ruefully admitted. There were a lot of things about keeping house on the prairie that had been a rather disagreeable surprise, but this business of laundry was the worst. She always washed and ironed her own underwear and cotton dresses, but the men's things and the sheets and towels—she had simply let them accumulate. She made a grimace to remember how at home she had only to drop her soiled clothes into a laundry hamper, and they turned up a few days later clean and neatly folded in her drawer. But not here, not here indeed!

It was true that Berry and Kent sometimes got out the washtub and had a big day of it. She recalled one such occasion in particular. She had come in from a solitary ride, feeling well content with herself and the world, to find the two men in the midst of a great splashing and commotion—Kent up to his elbows in soapsuds and Berry turning the wringer, while streams of water flowed unheeded onto the floor. They hardly noticed her when she sat down on the only vacant chair, with her feet on the rung and her skirt pulled up round her.

"How shall I help?" she asked presently, feeling rather out of it.

"Oh, no need," they assured her, "there isn't a thing for you to do."

She remembered how taken aback she had been—almost snubbed—until Berry called after her retreating figure that later on she might like to hang out some of these wet things.

Phyllis was sure there was no chance of their repeating this performance for the present, or for a long time, because after the oats were in, the wheat would be ripe, and harvest, it seemed, couldn't wait for anything. No, it was plainly up to her to do something. She turned over the clothes thrown into the basket in the shed, and her heart sank. There were so many of them and some were, oh, so dirty. Rather grimly, she got out the zinc tub, set it on two chairs, and filled it with water. Then, holding her nose, she sorted out a selection of men's clothes from the basket and dropped them into the tub.

Soap and rub, rub and soap; rub and dip, dip and rub! It was hard work and soon the perspiration was beaded on her forehead. If only she were taller or had something to stand on. Rummaging through the shed, she found a couple of bricks. The added height gave her more purchase, but still it was a long time, and to the battling girl it seemed forever, until the things were passably clean, rinsed, and piled in the basket ready to be hung out.

She pushed the damp curls from her ears and straightened her aching back. My word, but she was hot. Fanning herself with her apron, she wandered into the sitting room and tumbled into her armchair. Through the open door she could see the horizon wavering in the heat. The air

for once was still, and behind the screen the ceaseless hum of the mosquitoes was almost like a lullaby. How good it was to rest! Her eyes closed.

The klop-klop of a horse's hoofs hardly reached her consciousness. It was only when the sound stopped that she looked up. Then she jumped to her feet. A big chestnut stood at the hitching rail and by him, loosening his girth, stood a trim figure in a scarlet tunic. Constable Taylor!

"And what a sight I look," she exclaimed. She dashed into her room, tore off her wet apron, wiped her face with a towel, ran a comb through her hair, thrust her feet into her best slippers, and, clean handkerchief in hand, was back before he could knock.

"Here I am at last!" was Constable Taylor's joyous greeting as he stepped inside and closed the screen door behind him. They shook hands, and still holding hers, he glanced approvingly round the room.

"My word, this looks jolly. I bet it was different when Vernon lived here alone!"

Phyllis's eyes followed his. She was thinking how much gayer the room was for his red coat. "Sit down, please," she said, "and tell me how you come to be away out here." All her tiredness dropped off her like an unwanted cloak.

"Don't you remember," he reproached her, "I told you that night at the Thomsons' I was probably going on the valley patrol with Sergeant Stewart? Well, I did, I am. And this is my first afternoon off duty." With one leg

crossed above his knee, he leaned forward in his chair and gave her his engagingly impudent smile. "Are you glad to see me? Or, will it be only your brother who is pleased?"

Their eyes met and Phyllis, remembering her last words to him at the dance, had the grace to blush. "Perhaps I'm a bit pleased, too," she admitted. "Anyhow, wouldn't you like a cup of tea? I was just going to have one myself."

"That would be just fine. Can't I? . . ."

"No, you can't help, thank you. Suppose you put your horse up in the stable while I see if the kettle's boiling. You'll stay to supper, of course. I know Berry would be sorry to miss you," she added demurely.

" 'My brother' again," he murmured, and Phyllis giggled. "I was hoping to be invited," he admitted.

She was still in the kitchen, cutting cake, when Constable Taylor walked in through the back door. He stopped stock-still in the entrance. His eyes traveled from the basket of wet clothes on the floor to Phyllis as she poured boiling water into the teapot, then back to the telltale tub still full of rinsing water. A slow color mounted from his neck to his forehead.

"My word!" came from him in a shocked tone. "Don't tell me *you* do this sort of thing?"

"Of course, why not?" she replied airily, as though it were her daily habit. But his queer perturbed look embarrassed her and she moved to pick up the tea tray. He said no more, but took it out of her hands and carried it into the sitting room. After he had brought a chair for her

and drawn up another for himself, he gave a sigh of contentment. "This is a bit of all right. Afternoon tea once more—seems like getting back to civilization."

Phyllis's face showed her relief at his change of subject. "I always treat myself to a cup of tea about this time in the afternoon," she confessed, "and it's ten times nicer with company."

"Do you like it in the valley as much as you thought you would?" she asked as she poured cream into the cups.

"Do I! It's just simply a thousand times more fun than headquarters. And Sergeant Stewart is a grand old scout —you couldn't ask for better company. You know, a lot of the chaps in the barracks were good fellows, too, but some of them used to talk awful rot."

"Did they?" she wondered. "Well, you're where you wanted to be, now. What do you do all the time?"

"We ride around, listen to complaints from settlers, if there are any, keep our eyes peeled for whisky smugglers, look out for prairie fires. Often we go to the Indian reserve and powwow with the chief—at least, Stewart does. I can't understand a word they say. He certainly does know how to handle the Indians, and they all swear by him. I wish you knew Stewart," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "He's been in the Police since the year one. You should just hear some of his yarns."

"I'd love to. Why don't you bring him over some day?"

"He's rather shy of 'the ladies,' as he calls them, but if

you sent him a straight message, I think he'd probably come and be glad to."

"All right. Take him a straight message, but bring him soon, before the wheat is ripe."

"Before the wheat is ripe!" he exclaimed. "That sounds like a pretty primitive way of setting a date!"

Phyllis laughed. "You don't understand. We'll be terrifically busy then, so I'm informed, and probably have Indians or someone helping. It's bad enough now, while Berry and Mr. Averill are cutting the oats. By the way, make a good tea because they are likely to be late for supper."

"Righto," he replied, helping himself to more cake. "Personally, I don't mind how late they are. . . . You still call Kent 'Mr. Averill' I notice," he observed next, his mouth full of cake and his eyes dancing.

"Sometimes I do, especially when I'm speaking of him. Why not?"

"Well, it's proper to respect age," he mused. "He must be getting on for thirty."

"He's only twenty-five," she returned indignantly.

"All right, all right. Twenty-five then." He finished his slice and leaned across the table. "My point is that you and I are a lot younger, and why shouldn't we drop the Mr.'s and Miss's and just be Ronald—that's my name—and Phyllis? I know that's yours, and a pretty name it is. 'Phyllis is my only joy,' " he quoted. "We had to read the Elizabethan poets at school, and I thought of that line

the minute I heard Mrs. Thomson call you by name."

"Is it in Shakespeare?" she asked, more interested for the moment in the quotation than in his remark.

"No, one of those johnnies who wrote lyrics. I forget which now. But what about it? Are we Ronald and Phyllis from now on?"

"Yes, let's be."

"Fine." He jumped up, and brushed a cake crumb off his uniform. "Now come on, Phyllis, let's get the washing out of the way." Without more ado he marched into the kitchen and began dipping water out of the tub, while she stood by in helpless laughter.

"You find the clothespins," he ordered, "and we'll get the clothes hung out in a jiffy."

They had the kitchen cleared in quick order, the tea things washed and the table in the sitting room laid for the evening meal. And now Ronald was sitting on the corner of the kitchen table, strumming on Berry's banjo and watching Phyllis make biscuit for supper.

"Don't you think I'm a handy man about the house?" he kept asking.

"I shan't say," Phyllis replied. "You're conceited enough as it is."

> Phyllis is my only joy,
> Sometimes coming, sometimes coy,

he sang softly, still thrumming the banjo, and stooping to look in her face.

"What *is* that song?" she cried, exasperated.

"That's all I shall tell you now. Some of it isn't too complimentary."

She stamped her foot. "Put that banjo down and go and feed your horse. How do you suppose I can get supper ready with that thing twanging in my ear? You'll find oats in the bin opposite the loose box," she called after him as he disappeared through the back door on his way to the stable.

Outside, she heard him talking to Berry, heard their voices become fainter and fainter, and knew they had gone to the stable together. She cut out the biscuit with the lid of the baking powder can and kneaded the trimmings together, thinking, "This is a silly waste of time, making them all round. Next time I'll cut them any old shape and save all this trouble."

There was a footstep in the shed and Kent stood in the doorway. He hesitated a moment, then came over to where Phyllis was scraping the pastry board. "Pretty tired, aren't you?" he asked.

"Not so awfully," she replied cheerfully. "And, besides, Mr. Taylor helped me at the end."

He frowned. "*Taylor* helped you! You ought not to have to get help from outsiders. It's a shame. Someway, we ought to manage to do more for you."

"I get along all right," she replied rather shortly. She didn't like his calling Ronald an outsider. "Anyhow, I

didn't have to get help from Mr. Taylor. He just pitched in without my saying anything."

"Of course. I didn't mean . . . I only meant . . . you mustn't kill yourself for us, you know."

"I'm not likely to, you needn't worry."

She still felt a little huffed. "Doesn't he like Ronald?" she wondered as she heard Kent taking the stairs three at a time. "What made him talk like that?"

Supper over, the four of them strolled out to watch the full moon rise enormous above the rim of the prairie. A line of light on the southern horizon showed a far-off prairie fire, and the air was full of the odor of burning grass. Phyllis thought she had never smelt anything so intoxicating or seen a moon that hung so close to earth. The fragrant dusk, the immense stillness, kept her silent and dreaming. The others seemed to share the magic and for a while no one spoke. At last, Berry, slapping at his cheek, exclaimed that the mosquitoes were getting a bit too thick for him.

"You fellows stay and moon all you like, but I'm going to make a smudge so that we can exist in comfort." And off he went.

Gathered "in comfort," but with eyes smarting in the smoke, they sat cross-legged on the grass, Phyllis between Kent and Ronald, while Berry, banjo on knee, squatted at their feet.

"What shall we sing?" he asked, idly plucking at the strings, and then without waiting for answer, burst out with—

There were three crows sat on a tree
Oh Billy McGee McGaw
They were as black as black could be,
Oh Billy McGee Mc—

Phyllis broke in before Berry had fairly finished the first stanza—

And they all flapped their wings and cried
Caw, caw, caw—

she sang flapping her elbows. "That's a silly song, Berry. Do try something else."

Berry raised his eyebrows but was about to do as she asked when Ronald interrupted to say, "How would you like a pet crow, Phyllis? I know a fellow who has one and wants to get rid of it."

"So that we could flap wings together?" she asked, laughing.

"No, but really. This chap says a tame crow is awfully amusing. Just keep one wing clipped so he can't fly too far, and you needn't shut him up at all."

"Right you are," said a voice behind them, and Joe Perkins appeared out of the smoke. "I 'ad one myself once, and wot a mimic that bird was—cats, dogs, geese, roosters, anything came his way, he could take them all

off." Then, seeing Berry bent over his banjo, he turned to Kent. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came over to ask if I could borrow your small plow tomorrow to go over my firebreaks. Better to be safe than sorry—eh, Mr. Averill?"

"Right you are, and just as soon as we're through harvesting I'll be going over ours. Yes, take the plow and welcome."

"Come on and sing to us, Joe," Phyllis spoke up promptly, afraid they would begin talking farm and spoil the evening. "Give us one of your funny ballads."

"Will you have 'Riding in an 'Ansom Cab' or ' 'Ampton Court'?" he asked, settling himself cross-legged beside Berry. . . . "Whichever I like, miss? Very well." And he began without accompaniment in a high falsetto voice—

I beg your best attention
To facts I wish to mention
    About a dear delightful girl who led my 'eart astray,
Oh such an 'andsome creature
Perfection every feature,
    When first I saw her in a cab she stole my 'eart away.

Then the chorus—

    Riding in an 'Ansom cab
    So saucy and so gay.

As I along was strolling
A sweet love song carolling,
    I gave 'er one enraptured glance as she went driving by.

She dropped her eyes discreetly,
Then smiled on me so sweetly,
She seemed to say, "Well, p'raps you may, if you are not too shy."

Riding in an 'Ansom cab
So saucy and so shy.

They were all laughing when he finished. Berry told him that was no place to stop. They wanted to know how it all came out.

" 'E popped the question all correct," replied Joe, with the dry humor they had come to expect from him.

"Your turn, Ronald," cried Phyllis gaily. "See if you can beat Joe."

"I couldn't do that, but here's something might do for a follow-up." And nothing loath he began—

When the thorn is white with blossom
And the fountain flows again;
Tell me, Mother, must I fly him
If he seeks me on the plain?

Should I at the fall of twilight
Hear afar his flute's soft lays,
Mother, must I close the lattice
If I know for me he plays?

"There's lots more, verses and verses, but I forget them. And Mother never did answer the poor girl's questions. Now, Phyllis, it's up to you."

"Oh, I don't know anything, and I haven't any voice, anyhow," she replied hurriedly. "What about Kent? He's

the musician here." But Kent, who was lying on his back looking up at the stars now clustered thickly overhead, seemed not to hear. He had been silent so long she wondered whether he found them all—Ronald, Berry and herself—very young and silly.

"Wake up, partner." This from Berry. "We want you to sing."

"Does Averill sing?" asked Ronald as though he was surprised.

"*Does he!* You should just hear him. But *will* he, that's the question. It's like drawing teeth to get him started. Come on, fellow, you can't plead chores tonight."

Kent roused himself and sat up, and soon his voice, low but penetrating, floated out on the perfumed air—

> Stars of the summer night,
> Far in your azure deeps,
> Hide, hide your golden light,
> She sleeps, my lady sleeps.

How beautiful, thought Phyllis. Has he really a lady? I do like him when he's like this.

The deep voice went on—

> Moon of the summer night,
> Far down your western steeps,
> Sink, sink, in silver light,
> She sleeps, my lady sleeps.

He finished and Phyllis wished that no one would speak. But Ronald, seemingly unaware of the magic of the mo-

ment, stood up, remarking that it was pretty nearly time they were all sleeping.

"Good-by, Phyllis," he said, "and thanks ever so much. I've enjoyed this no end. And next time I come, look for the crow."

CHAPTER IX

Threshing Time on the Farm

A few days later, Ronald and Flora drove up together, with a mysterious object covered by a blanket fastened onto the back of the buckboard. When the blanket was taken off, the object proved to be a wicker cage, in which a coal-black crow was hopping from perch to perch.

"Here you are, Phyllis," cried Ronald, "come and make friends with Pip. He's yours now."

"Oh, Ronald, is he really for me? I thought you were just joking the other night. Look, Flora, isn't he a beauty?"

She stooped down and called, "Pip, good old Pip," coaxingly to the bird, who lowered his wings, put his head on one side and seemed to answer her.

"He likes you already," said Flora. "I'm jealous. He wouldn't take any notice of me, and he just fights Ronald."

"That's because I fight him. See?"—and Ronald stuck his finger between the bars of the cage. Immediately the crow ruffled his feathers and gave the finger an angry peck. As Ronald continued to tease him, the bird pecked again and again.

"Stop being mean to my crow," cried Phyllis, pulling his arm away. "I want him to be happy here." And again

she stooped down and talked soothingly to the angry bird, which responded by low throaty cawings.

Less than three weeks later, Pip and Phyllis were fast friends. He was no longer confined to the cage, but followed her about as she moved between the house and garden or the house and the barn, and sometimes lighted on her shoulder. She had taught him to come when she called, "Pip, Pip." With his clipped wing, he could still fly all round the homestead, but showed no inclination to go farther.

Neither Flora nor Constable Taylor had visited the Pile o' Bones Farm since they had brought the crow, but Phyllis was hardly sorry, for nowadays there was simply no time at all. First there had been the wheat harvest with two extra men engaged, and now the threshers were expected any day. She looked forward with dread to their coming, for she had hardly yet got over her dismay at the amount of food just four men could get through.

Today, Berry had gone to town. He wanted to find out, if possible, just when the gang was likely to arrive at the farm. There were supplies to be thought of as well. He had asked Phyllis to go with him, but she felt too tired for the long, slow drive. Even the prospect of an hour or two with the Tiltons did not tempt her. Now it was past suppertime and still Berry was not home.

"Suppose we begin without him," suggested Kent, waiting hungrily about as Phyllis was struggling to keep things

hot. "He might even, you know, decide to have supper in town and drive home by moonlight."

"I hardly think he'd do that."

"Why not? There's a pretty strong attraction there, isn't there?"

Phyllis looked up, startled. "I don't know what you mean."

Kent's eyebrows went up. "Girl," he said, "hasn't it ever occurred to you that he and Mary Tilton are, well, rather particularly— Don't look so dismayed. A popular chap like your brother is bound to be interested in girls. There may be nothing in it, of course, but suppose there were? Mary's about as good as they make them, don't you think?"

"Oh, she is, she certainly is. But I never thought. . . ." It was a staggering idea. Berry in love. But no more could be said, for at that moment the young man himself pulled up at the door.

"Threshers coming tomorrow," he shouted as he threw the reins across the horses' patient backs and jumped down.

Threshers already! Phyllis groaned inwardly. With a sinking heart she looked on as Berry carried in a sackful of loaves of bread, another crammed with canned stuff, a side of bacon, a big roast of beef, coffee, sugar, et cetera.

"Something to start on," he cried, cheerful as usual.

"How many will there be?" asked Phyllis in a small voice.

"Ten in the gang besides ourselves," he replied. "And they expect to be well fed, too, darn them." He laughed. "Buck up, Phyl, it'll only be for two days, or three at the outside."

Phyllis made butter that night. The two men, busy outside with their own preparations, could not help her. Next morning she was up early, baking pies and peeling potatoes against the horde expected for dinner. Berry set up trestle tables outdoors for meals. They would bring their own sleeping tent.

By ten o'clock they were there, engine running, and at work. How she managed it she hardly knew, but by noon the huge roast was cooked, the vegetables ready, the bread cut and on the table, coffee hot and ready to pour—she had made the coffee in the watering can, nothing else was big enough. Kent carved and Berry carried the plates out as she filled them. He was back for more before all were served, but, thank goodness, there was enough of everything. The pies were on the table, already cut and they helped themselves. And when the fray was over and Phyllis went out to collect the plates, there wasn't a scrap of pie to be seen. Not one piece! Out of four big pies! And "I hoped there would be some left over for tomorrow," she thought grimly.

The men cut short their noon hour and went back to work. Berry and Kent went with them. Phyllis was left with that stack of dishes, and the problem of supper before her. But both "her two" had praised her, and her courage

still held out. She scraped off the plates into the pig pail, made up the fire, and set on plenty of water to heat.

At last everything was clean and put away, the floor swept, tables washed, and even the stove wiped down. If only that were all! But there were layer cakes to make for supper. Thoughtful of trouble for once, Berry had brought a pail of strawberry jam. Phyllis blessed him for this; to make fillings on such a busy day would be just too much. Half an hour before supper the oven was full once more, this time with biscuit. She got through the day somehow, and tumbled into bed at half past eight, too exhausted to sit up another minute.

On the second day Phyllis took time to run over and look at the threshing machine at work. It was clacking and clattering away, seeming as busy as the men who swarmed around it. A belt connected it with the straw-burning engine, and appeared to vibrate with a life of its own. The air was full of noise and chaff. At one end men fed sheaves into the monster, while at the other the traveler brought up an unceasing stream of straw, which was immediately forked into place on a fast-growing stack.

Berry saw her coming. His hair and even his eyebrows were full of chaff; his eyes looked red and inflamed. But he grinned as he pointed up at Kent working for dear life amid the flying straw. "Always picks the hardest work," he shouted in her ear. "Look here." He showed the river of wheat pouring into sacks. "Number One, Hard," he

said, picking up a handful, "and panning out better than we estimated. The other field will go higher still, or I'm much mistaken. Probably twenty-seven to the acre." There was triumph in his voice.

"We're about through here," he shouted against the roar of the machine. "We'll be moving up to the north end in a few minutes." In spite of his tired eyes, Berry looked happy. "You all right, Phyl?" he asked.

Phyllis nodded, not trying to make herself heard. She pointed to the rapidly filling sack and shouted, "Fine," into Berry's ear, then turned and went quickly back to the house. Halfway there she began to run, harried by the thought of all there was yet to do. A stab of something like despair shot through her at the sight of the piled-up basket of laundry in the shed.

The bakery loaves had disappeared like snow in the sun; there was no substance in them, only "something to start on," as Berry had truly told her. By suppertime she would be out of bread.

Kneading dough was always hard work, and this was a big batch. Over and over she turned it while her back ached worse and worse. Could she stand this life? It was not the first time since that June day when the rain turned the kitchen into a mud puddle that she had seriously asked herself this question. It had all turned out so differently from her expectations. Like a little fool, she had pictured herself in a pretty apron preparing cosy meals for two people, with Berry always ready to go riding with her

or take her to town. She had had no idea of what it meant to keep house in a place where every drop of clean water had to be carried into the house and every drop of dirty water carried out. It wasn't Berry's fault. He had written all about it—except about Kent of course—but she just had not taken it in.

I was an idiot, she thought glumly, not to realize it was a *farm* I was coming to. In vain she reminded herself that threshing was a special time. There was always something special. And when would it be different? When *could* it be different? Never. It couldn't. A farm must go on and on. And she would have to go on too. Unless—she stopped kneading and gazed with unseeing eyes out of the window. Unless. . . . But it wasn't a "home" at Aunt Lydia's. Besides, to desert Berry. . . .

"Oh, Mummy," she cried, "if only you were here." And a tear trickled down onto the dough. But her mother was gone. The house on the Thames belonged to someone else now. Another tear fell. She blinked it away and sniffed. There was no time even to cry!

Four o'clock in the afternoon. The bread was baked. Phyllis lifted the loaves onto the table, took them out of the tins, and let them lean against the wall to cool. The crust was a golden brown. They looked perfect. Now at last she could take a breathing spell for half an hour. She longed terribly to throw herself down on the bed to rest her weary limbs and aching back.

At that moment the door opened and an Indian stalked

in. With his feathered headband and his blanket wrapped round him, toga fashion, he looked enormous—seemed to fill the kitchen. Phyllis was so startled that her legs almost gave way beneath her. For a wild moment she thought of calling for help, then remembered that all the men were half a mile away and could not possibly hear. She had seen Indians in town, and sometimes Indians on the trail, but never close to, or alone, like this. Why had he come? What did he want? Had this huge painted creature come to scare her? Well, he shouldn't. However frightened she really felt, however much her legs trembled, she would not let him see she was afraid.

Holding onto this resolution, but clutching the edge of the table with one hand, she gave him the Cree salutation, "How nitchie." Then she waited.

The Indian's grunt in reply might mean anything. He stood immovable, arms folded. The massive aquiline features had no expression. Phyllis's eye took in at one glance the stripes of red paint on his cheeks, the braids of black hair lengthened with bits of fur and red flannel, the blue beadwork on moccasins and buckskin shirt, the fringes on his leggings. Why didn't he say something, or go? He did neither. But at least he did not seem hostile. She saw her chance for a rest slipping away, but she just wouldn't dare to turn him out.

Then a happy thought struck her. Perhaps he was hungry! She knew Indians never begged, but he might have come for food nevertheless. She cut some of the cold

roast, and added potatoes—cold of course, but that couldn't be helped. As she set these on the table, he regarded her with haughty unconcern, but she felt sure that underneath he was interested. She cut slices off one of the new loaves and got out butter, then motioned him to sit down.

Tea! He must have tea. They were crazy about it. Choosing the biggest cup on the shelf, she filled it from the teapot that still stood on the back of the stove, forgotten from the midday meal. The Indian was now making away with the food to an accompaniment of loud appreciative smacks. Phyllis was getting over her fright. The tea smelt good. She poured herself a cup and drank it standing by the stove. She even giggled to think she was "taking tea with a redskin!"

He had finished now and stood up, making a grunt of satisfaction. So that was what he wanted after all—not to murder her! She smiled and nodded in response. The Indian carefully rearranged his blanket, pulling it over to form a bag, and before she realized what he was doing, he had swept into it the loaf she had cut and all the six others that were cooling off!

Phyllis gasped and took a half step forward. But the noble red man, with perfect dignity and without any appearance of haste, stalked by her and was gone.

Her bread! Her lovely bread! She had fed the man and been kind to him and this was what he did. She started to run after him, but checked herself. If he could steal bread

off the table before her eyes, what might he not do if she angered him! If only Berry were here, or Kent!

Running into the sitting room, she snatched up the shotgun, broke it open, and pushed in a couple of the loaded shells. If he meant mischief, she would be ready for him. The front door was open, and out of it she saw the thief quite calmly mount his pony, dig it in the ribs with his heel, and lope away. Trembling with rage, she watched him go, then threw the gun down on the sofa and burst into angry tears.

An hour later, Kent, coming for the milk pails, found the doors shut and locked. Phyllis turned from wearily putting big pans of biscuit into the oven to let him in. Her face was still tear-stained and woebegone. She was feeling very sorry for herself.

"Why, child," he exclaimed, "what's the matter?" At the kindness in his voice, her tears broke out afresh.

"I was so frightened," she sobbed, and bit by bit told him all the story. Kent did not interrupt her, but as he listened the concern in his face gradually gave way to an amused smile. When she came to the shotgun episode, he laughed outright.

Phyllis stopped crying to look at him indignantly.

"Come here," he said, and with rough tenderness wiped her eyes with his own handkerchief. "You poor girl, you did have a fright. The Indians drop in on us like that once in a while. We ought to have warned you. And of course no one ever thought to mention that it's Indian etiquette

to leave nothing on the table. If you can't eat everything at the time, you take it away with you. So your friend was just being polite. See?"

Phyllis did see. Her face cleared, though her breath still came in long sighs. A little rueful smile gradually took the place of the indignation. She glanced at Kent apologetically and stammered, "How absurd! Suppose I had shot him!"

"I don't think he was in much danger," returned her companion dryly. "But you might have surprised him." He picked up the milk pails, gave her an encouraging pat, and went off.

Phyllis leaned against the doorpost and watched the tall lean figure swinging along with the pails, whistling, and wondered, "Did he think me a ninny?" She turned to put another stick of wood in the stove. "But how I wish there was time to lie down for a few minutes." A glance at the clock told her there was no time. They would be up for supper in an hour, and there was lots to do yet. She scurried about, laying tables, slicing ham, making potato salad, setting out butter, milk, and pickles, cutting slices of jelly cake. Now and then she stopped to wipe the perspiration from her forehead, or to straighten her back, but when six o'clock came, supper was on the table.

As soon as Berry came in, she broke down and cried, this time from sheer fatigue. She could do no more, she declared, and Berry, sympathetic and rather frightened, bundled her off to bed. Settled there, he brought her a

tray heaped with food. She could eat none of it, but drank the tea gratefully. The cup was no sooner empty than she fell into a profound sleep and knew nothing more until the six-o'clock alarm next morning called her to a new day.

CHAPTER X

Prairie Fire!

Less than a week had gone by since the threshers had finished their job at the Pile o' Bones Farm and moved on to their next engagement. To Phyllis the two days of their visit were like a bad dream, but like a dream half forgotten. Today she was alone. Kent and Berry were away hauling the precious wheat to town, and would not be back until late.

Though the month was September, it was a sweltering hot day. For once, there was no wind. Phyllis let the coat she was mending slip to the floor. The needle was wet in her wet hand and she panted as she picked up the palm-leaf fan to try to stir the heavy atmosphere about her. Outside, the horses and cattle in the pasture moved uneasily about.

It had not been so oppressive early in the morning, but toward noon the wind dropped and big thunderheads began to pile up on the horizon. Phyllis could see the rosy summer lightning play among them and even hear an occasional distant rumble of thunder. But that did not disturb her. Often the clouds appeared, but they stayed low down in the sky and seldom really meant rain.

The fan did not seem to do much good, so she tried opening the front door. Immediately the hot air rushed in. She stepped outside; it was like stepping into an oven. And the mosquitoes! Thick! Brushing them off her face and neck, she turned back to the house.

There was that coat, still unmended. She forced herself to pick it up, but it was no good. How could anyone sew in such heat? She flung herself down on the sofa and lay gazing at the picture her father had painted. How deliciously cool and green that Thames scene looked. What a contrast to the scorched prairie—to the sun pouring down all day on the unshaded roof. Life was easy at home —not like this. Not like this, indeed. How she hated the everlasting round of things that must be done, and all the talk about farm, farm, nothing but farm. Not a word about books or painting.

Even while she grumbled, she knew how unfair she was. She was ruling out of her mind the riding, the jolly evenings when they sang to Berry's banjo, the occasional excursions. The heat had made her querulous.

Down in the pasture the horses were behaving very strangely; they were running back and forth; even the cows were on the move. She forgot her troubles in watching them. It was the mosquitoes! They were driving the poor creatures crazy. Should she try to get the horses into the stable? No, better to make a smudge out there. Gathering some chips in the dustpan, she went down to the manure pile in the pasture, fighting off the pests as she

went. It wasn't a moment before she had a blaze going—well within the edge of the pile, for safety—and promptly smothered it with sagebrush and dry manure.

The smoke streamed out; it trailed in a long line, hanging close to the ground in the heavy air. Almost at once the horses took refuge in it. Their bodies were gray with mosquitoes, in spite of the switching tails. Phyllis walked among them, brushing them down with handfuls of sagebrush. Even Turvey stood still to be handled and seemed grateful for the comfort—Turvey who was usually so wary of being caught. The horses strung out, faces to the smoke, and after them, where it thinned, the cows humbly took up their positions.

Phyllis watched them with satisfaction. That was better. She felt better herself for the exertion. Now for a cup of tea! The tea made her hotter than ever, but she felt refreshed and was sure she would be more comfortable for it later on. This was her firm conviction: if you were cold, tea would warm you; if you were too warm, it would cool you off.

The thunder was getting louder, and the clouds climbing the sky. How magnificent they were! But savage-looking. There was one shaped like a plow, cutting its way through the heavens. "I *am* a farmer"—she laughed to herself—"thinking of plows in the sky." There was wind up there—different currents, for one set of clouds was blowing one way, and another set, lower, blowing in exactly the opposite direction. On the ground it was

still calm, and the animals stood quiet in the smoke.

Phyllis went outside. She was uneasy without knowing why, and wished the men were home. As she stood there, a puff of wind ruffled the surface of the creek, another puff reached her, and it was icy cold! Running inside, she hastily closed all doors and windows. Then she thought of the smudge. If a high wind came, it might blow the embers onto the grass and start a prairie fire. And the biggest haystack stood on that side of the creek!

There was a blinding flash, followed immediately by a peal of thunder that shook the house. Phyllis hesitated; that had been very close. But another puff of wind determined her, and she ran down the bank, across the footbridge, to the pasture. She reached the smudge, scattered it, and trod it out—so she thought—hurrying because she was afraid. It was getting darker every minute.

Then the wind struck. It was followed by hail as big as cherries. Putting her arms round her head to protect it, she battled her way back. By the time she reached home her exposed hands were numb. And then, as though it had done its work, the hail stopped.

Phyllis looked back to see how the animals were faring, and to her consternation saw that the grass beside the manure pile was on fire. Her heart gave a sickening leap. She knew what to do, but it meant going out into the storm again. There was no time to lose, however. Quickly she tied a gunny sack around the broom, but her hands were still awkward and half lifeless. Wetting the broom in

the creek as she crossed, she attacked the fire from the side, beating it with all her strength. Lightning flared round her and the thunder seemed to crack the sky. It grew darker and darker, terrifyingly dark. If only the rain would come! The hail had been enough to slow up the fire but not to extinguish it. And now the wind and heat were fast drying up that pitiful bit of moisture.

The gunny sack took fire. Phyllis had to stop to wet it again in the creek. Then she was back. Whack. Whack. Whack. Her legs shook under her with excitement and fatigue. And the fire was getting ahead of her, work as she might. If only she could head it off from the haystack. The house and farm buildings were safe on the other side of the creek—she need not think of them. But that haystack, she knew, was precious.

Suddenly the wind dropped, died away, was gone. Phyllis knew it would come again. That was the way storms did here. But this interval of calm was heaven. She allowed herself a moment to rest. In that moment she had an inspiration. Better than fighting a losing battle against the fire would be to strengthen the fireguard round the haystack itself. She knew that Kent had meant to go over all the firebreaks just as soon as threshing was over. But could she possibly do it? And would there be time? She looked round at the horses. They were quite comfortably grazing; the wind had blown away the mosquitoes. She caught Jenny by the halter without any difficulty, and faithful old Joe could be depended on to follow where

Jenny went. It seemed ages before she had led them round by the bridge to the stable, and more ages before she could get the harness on them. How thankful she was now for Kent's lessons. The plow was standing in the fold yard, and she had it attached to the horses in double-quick time.

With the reins round her neck, and her heart pounding with excitement, she got horses and plow to the haystack just as the wind came again. The firebreak was half grown up with weeds. She set the plow into the old furrow, clucked to the horses, and started. The plow ran out. She stopped and started again, made a few yards, and it ran out again. She could not keep it in the ground. Time after time it ran out, but she would not give up.

In spite of the wind having changed, the fire continued to come her way, creeping up, getting steadily nearer and nearer. The horses, steady old stand-bys as they were, were beginning to show signs of restiveness. She had been round only twice, and what good was that? The wind roared in her ears, maddening and confusing her. Her skirt tangled in her legs. The plow ran out for the millionth time, as it seemed to her. Jenny showed signs of panic. Phyllis had to let go of the plow handles to manage the horses. Another blaze of lightning, a roar of thunder, and Joe and Jenny were beyond control. It was hopeless to attempt to plow further. By a supreme effort, she got their heads turned in toward the haystack long enough to lift off the double tree and free them from the plow. Then they were off. She hung onto the reins, and half running and half dragged,

managed to steer them across the bridge and into safety.

She was dripping with perspiration and shaking with fatigue when she got her horses once more into the fold yard. Leaning against the fence, panting, her head down on her arms, she told herself bitterly that she had failed. If she had been more thorough in putting out the smudge, all this would not have happened. If she had even got the horses at once instead of spending all that time trying to fight the fire, perhaps it would have been different. Now Berry's beautiful haystack was gone, and all her fault. She could not bear to look at the inevitable destruction.

So intent was she on her self-condemnation that she did not at first notice that the wind had dropped. There was a moment's intense calm, then the rain came at last, the longed-for rain, suddenly, in sheets. It galvanized her into life. Was it too late? She ran out of the fold yard. There, golden on the burnt pasture, stood the haystack, whole, and now safe. Tongues of fire had reached almost to the firebreak, almost but not quite. In her acute relief, Phyllis fell on her knees. She did not say a word, but thankfulness seemed to flow from her up into the teeming skies. The Bible words came to her unsought: "There was the sound of abundance of rain, and the plague was stayed."

CHAPTER XI

A Winter Surprise Party

The early winter of the North settled down on plain and valley. It was only November, but the thermometer never rose above freezing point. The creek lay black and frozen —an invitation to skaters. And Phyllis had skates now. The day the last load of wheat was sold, Berry came home with skates for his sister, and not only skates, but a red blanket coat, ordered secretly as a surprise from the Hudson Bay store in Winnipeg.

Phyllis was delighted. She buttoned the coat across her chest and tied the striped sash round her waist. With her fair skin and bright hair, it became her wonderfully.

"How perfectly lovely!" she exclaimed, craning to get a view of herself in the mirror. "Berry, you extravagant darling! And I thought you said we should have to be careful this winter!" She blew him a kiss. "Where *did* you get it? Not in Regina, I'm sure. Now, all that's left is to learn to skate." She laughed, not waiting for an answer.

It was Kent who gave her the first lessons. She took to skating like a duck to water, being one of those lucky persons, he told her, who know naturally how to keep their

balance. However that was, in three days—with lots of hard practice and a few hard falls—she learned to skate forward and backward and to do the outside edge.

But what she liked best was to skate fast, fast down the creek with him, hands crossed, taking those long sweeping strokes that carried them almost to the bank on either hand. It was the most exhilarating experience she had ever had. For the moment, even riding was forgotten.

Absorbed in this new pastime she spent happy hours practicing the simple figures Kent taught her. Not that he was always on the ice, or Berry either, but they could take an hour off now and then. The stress and strain of the harvest, threshing and hauling the crop to the railway were over, the plowing was at an end perforce, for the ground was frozen, and all three were in the mood for a bit of fun.

Of course, there was still plenty to do. When wasn't there, Phyllis thought, as she watched the two men banking up the house, putting on double windows, and building a storm porch round the front door.

Making the house weatherproof was only one of the preparations for the winter that astonished Phyllis. The food that was stacked up seemed to her inexperience enough to feed an orphan asylum for a year. In the shed was a barrel of fish, each one frozen as hard as a stone. Half a sheep and a quarter of beef, also frozen, hung from the rafters. Cabbage, carrots, and onions were stored in sand in the cellar, to be drawn on as needed. In the cellar,

too—greatest treasure of all—was a barrel of Baldwin apples imported from the Eastern provinces. Sacks of potatoes, well covered with straw, were piled under the stable roof.

This was not all. The back of the house that faced north and never caught the sun was hung with prairie chicken, wild duck, and wild geese, all frozen and well out of reach of marauding animals.

It had been a new experience to see the flocks and flocks of duck and geese fly over on their way south. Sometimes the geese would swoop down from their *V* formation and settle in the stubble fields to pick up the scattered grain. Their wild honkings always thrilled the girl. She learned to distinguish between different kinds of duck by the way they flew, and sometimes in the twilight would hear a rush of wings and know that a flock of teal was passing low over her head.

Berry was going about with a mysterious air. Once or twice Phyllis caught him whispering to Kent. She accused him of hiding something from her, but he only shut his lips tight and sent her a mischievous gleam out of his blue eyes. As they finished their midday meal, he proposed that they have "a good go at skating this afternoon, and hang all work!"

"Right by me," agreed Kent, getting up as he spoke to carry out the plates.

"Oh, jolly," cried Phyllis, surprised and pleased at Kent's ready agreement, especially when he added, "We'll help you with the dishes and get everything out of the way in ten minutes."

The last plate had just been put on the shelf, the last saucepan hung behind the stove, when wheels were heard outside, rattling over the frozen ground. Phyllis dropped the dish towel she had just been using and flung off her apron. "Someone coming," she exclaimed joyfully and ran to the front. There were Dr. Tilton and Mary, with young Peter tucked between them on the buckboard seat. And, wonder of wonders, they had brought their skates. What fun! It would be a regular party.

The doctor would not get out. They all clustered round trying to persuade him, but no, he said, he had to visit a patient several miles farther out. On his way back he'd maybe spend an hour—and even try the ice if they happened still to be on it.

"Cure her quick and come back," Phyllis called after him. "I want to show you how well I can do a figure eight."

"I believe you knew they were coming," she accused Berry. "Did he, Mary? He's been looking all day like a cat that was sure of its mouse."

Mary laughed, exchanged a glance with Berry, but made no reply. She was carrying a package and asked if she might put it in the kitchen.

"Let me take it," said Peter, "it's—"

"Never mind what it is, just take it along," his sister scolded him.

"Aren't we ever going to begin skating?" grumbled the boy. The way these grown-up people stood around talking was a frightful waste of time.

"Don't wait for us," Berry told him. "Cut away down to the creek."

Peter darted off at the word, but just outside the storm porch called back, "There's someone else coming," and pointed up the trail.

Phyllis ran out, coatless and hatless, and saw one buckboard close at hand and another in the distance. "What in the world is happening?" she cried. "I never saw so many people."

Mr. and Mrs. Thomson arrived next, and close behind them Flora and Alec MacDonald. They all seemed to have brought packages, and they all carried skates. Phyllis welcomed them, but bewilderment was written all over her expressive face. How did it happen that everyone came at once like this, when days and weeks went by with nobody at all turning into their trail? And what had made them all think of skating?

Nobody explained anything until Mrs. Thomson burst into her hearty laugh and put her finger under the girl's chin. "If you could see yourself, my dear, so puzzled! It's a surprise party. I guess you don't have them in England —too informal for the old country. Young Berry knew

about it a week ago, and it was all arranged to skate if the snow held off—and, glory be, it has."

"Well, Flora," she called to the MacDonalds, "did you remember to bring the cookies?"

For answer Flora held up a square biscuit canister, and shook it slightly. Brother and sister both wore white blanket coats, with parti-colored stripes at the hem, and red sashes.

"Good," shouted Mrs. Thomson, who never lowered her voice. "I was afraid you'd forget." She turned to Phyllis. "Now, child, stop looking responsible. You don't have a thing to worry about. We've brought supper, and when the time comes, you and I will make a big pot of coffee, and that's all there will be to it. So get your skates and have a good time. . . . Anyone want to get warm before going down to the creek?" she called out, already the master of ceremonies.

Nobody did, and the eight of them streamed down the slope. If only Ronald could have come, thought Phyllis, all my best friends would be here. I wonder if he knows how to skate or has just learned, like me.

As though in answer to her thoughts, Mrs. Thomson remarked, "I sent word to Ronald Taylor to try to get here this afternoon."

Alec looked up from clasping Phyllis's skates onto her boots. "He is coming, and what's more he says he'll bring Sergeant Stewart with him this time or—I forget what he threatened, something desperate."

"Something desperate, I'll bet," exclaimed Mrs. Thomson. "That fool boy!"

"Now, Maggie," expostulated her husband. "The boy's all right, just young. Miss Phyllis"—he blandly elbowed Alec aside—"let us show them how it's done."

By ones and twos they took to the ice. With the exception of the Vernons, to whom skating was new, and Flora, who proved to be surprisingly unskillful, all were thoroughly at home on skates. They cut figures, twisted and turned and leaped into the air. Berry and Phyllis, looking on, applauded each new feat. Phyllis declared herself wild with envy.

Unlike Phyllis, Flora soon tired of watching the experts and in a stumbling way skated up and down alone. After one of her short excursions she stopped beside Berry and looking up at him, said plaintively, "I can't get on without a strong arm to hold me up." Berry laughed and immediately came to her assistance, turning from Mary with whom he had been doing some double figures, and who looked rather disconcerted at this interruption. Yes, there was no doubt about it, Flora had a way with her. Each partner in turn was treated to a glowing look from her beautiful eyes, to the concealed amusement of Phyllis, who tried to figure out which one was the most favored. Even young Peter followed her about.

There was such a ringing of skates up and down the creek, such laughing and shouting to one another, that the arrival of two latecomers passed unnoticed. Berry was

the first to spy the uniformed figures on top of the bank and hailed them. Phyllis skated up, all smiles. She just caught herself from greeting Ronald by his Christian name—perhaps that wouldn't do before his sergeant, whom she had never met.

Sergeant Stewart himself seemed shy. He stammered a "How do you do" when introduced and actually blushed. This put Phyllis quite at her ease. If someone else blushed, all her own diffidence left her. She made a special effort to entertain the stranger, neglecting Ronald, who at last skated off alone. Following him with her eyes, she was pleased to see that he was no beginner. Neither was the sergeant. As they skated, she felt herself propelled forward or backward with an effortless certainty that gave her confidence in her own powers. He was the oldest man in the crowd, thirty-five at least, Phyllis guessed, noting the heavy lines on the sun-browned face—a good Scotch face, full of character and authority.

The last to arrive was Joe Perkins. How in the world did he know about the surprise party, Phyllis wondered. But she was glad to see him. Joe was always fun, either alone or in a crowd. No more did he boast of being "a bit of an 'ermit." He did not skate, but had his own way of amusing himself. With many shufflings of his boots on the already slippery ice, he succeeded in making a slide, down the length of which he slid, balancing himself with waving arms.

"Many a time I done this on the Serpentine in Hyde

Park," he told the amused sergeant, who stopped skating to watch him. This was Ronald's opportunity. He had been on the ice a good twenty minutes and hadn't skated with Phyllis yet.

"I thought you were never going to speak to me," he grumbled, tucking his arm in hers and drawing her away.

"Much you missed me," she scoffed. "I saw you, don't think I didn't, all devotion to the fascinating Flora. And she gazing at you out of those big eyes as though—"

"Oh, hush up!" exclaimed Ronald rudely, and immediately apologized. "Don't tease me, Phyllis," he pleaded. "Not today, I can't stand it."

"All right, we won't tease the baby. But what's the matter? Aren't you well?"

He made no reply but continued to skate in silence.

"We'd better turn here," she said at last. "This is the end of the good ice."

"Come a little farther," he begged, "just round the next bend. There's something I want to say to you—something particular."

"All right. But don't look so serious. It doesn't seem natural."

Round the next bend they slowed to a halt. He loosed her hands and faced her. Suddenly his face grew scarlet. "Phyllis," he began, "I—"

At that inopportune moment Alec's voice was heard calling, "Miss Vernon, Miss Vernon." And he shot round the bend toward them.

"Confound these MacDonalds," muttered Ronald, turning away to hide his confusion.

"Mrs. Thomson sent me to fetch you. She thinks it's time to make the coffee."

Phyllis was disappointed at the interruption. She wondered what Ronald had been going to say. There was nothing for it, however, but to turn homeward.

Her curiosity grew as she unclasped and unstrapped her skates and went with Mrs. Thomson into the kitchen. One keen glance that lady gave her and Ronald, and then in the most matter-of-fact way in the world set the girl to unwrapping packages, piling dishes with sandwiches, setting out cake and cookies, and skimming cream for the coffee. By the time all was ready and the skaters began to pour into the little house, Phyllis had forgotten the incident.

In the sitting room the table was fairly covered with the good things the guests had brought. A coconut layer cake dripping richness contrasted with the dark lusciousness of the devil's food. Scotch shortbread mingled with hard gingerbread "nuts." The steaming coffee sent out an inviting fragrance. There was a babble of talk in the midst of which Peter's shrill young voice was heard asking plaintively when they were going to begin.

"Help yourself," Mrs. Thomson told him. "Here, take this plate and then find yourself a seat on the floor. There aren't chairs to go round."

"I'll sit on the floor, too." Flora flopped down beside

him, back to the bookcase. "Please hand me something, somebody."

Three young men stepped forward. Berry offered her sandwiches—the triangular ones were prairie chicken and the square ones whitefish paste, Mrs. Thomson called over. Kent brought coffee, and Ronald, with a glance toward Phyllis, followed with cream and sugar. Flora made a motion toward the floor beside her, and everyone laughed when Joe Perkins slid by the three into the empty place.

"The best part of a sandwich is the middle," he said gallantly, with a gesture that included Peter, Flora, and himself.

"Sweet of you to say so." Flora could spare a captivating smile even for Joe.

There was a lull in the laughter and conversation while the hungry skaters concentrated on sandwiches, but when second cups went round and the famous coconut cake was cut, talk broke out afresh. They began teasing Phyllis and telling her what she had to expect in the way of weather in January.

"Do you remember your first winter here, Mrs. Thomson, in that cold house?" called Kent across the room. "And the turkey that took all day to thaw and froze again every night, so you never did get a chance to cook it?"

"*Do* I?" replied the lady, wrinkling up her pretty nose in disgust. "I can smell it yet!"

A shout of laughter greeted this rejoinder. Other winter experiences were brought out and in a short time everyone was either chattering or listening to chatter. Everyone, that is, except Alec, who sat off in a corner by himself and sipped his coffee in silence. He certainly was no talker, thought Phyllis. Perhaps he was shy. But anyhow, he ought not to be left out in the cold. She took her cup and dropped into a chair beside him.

"What have you been doing with yourself lately?" she asked, by way of an opening.

Rather to her surprise, he answered quite readily, "Getting in the winter's wood supply for the most part. You know most people dread the winter, but I love it—frozen turkeys or no frozen turkeys," he added with a smile for Mrs. Thomson's difficulties. "It's in winter that you can really get into the woods—no flies to bother. Game tracks show up plainly. They don't drift over as they do on the prairie." He warmed to his subject, and before Phyllis knew it she was listening with absorbed interest to his lore of the wildlife of the country. Watching the usually somber face light up, she felt the charm Berry had once spoken of.

Yet how different he was from Ronald, for instance, who was always so easy to understand. Phyllis let her eyes roam round the room, taking in the different men. They rested affectionately for a moment on Berry, passed on to Sergeant Stewart, so Scotch and sturdy, and then to Kent. If she was sizing everybody up, what about him? Depend-

able? Yes, certainly. But so, she fancied, was the sergeant. Kind? Yes, see how tenderly he had bound up Topsy's leg when she tore it on the barbed wire. She could imagine Stewart kind, too, for all his stern looks. Yet the two men were quite different. What was it? There were *thoughts* in Kent, she decided at last, thoughts that she was always trying to read, and couldn't. Kent Averill. A fine name—it suited him.

Mr. Thomson's authoritative voice broke in on her reverie.

"All you young people who have just been in this country a year or two," he was saying to the room at large, "seem to imagine nothing happened here until *you* arrived on the scene. I'll wager not one of you knows anything about the trek of the Northwest Mounted Police in 1874 all the way from Winnipeg to the Rockies. Do you?"

There was a general shaking of heads.

"Well, here's a man"—he laid his hand on Sergeant Stewart's shoulder—"who took part in it."

"What was it? Tell us about it," came from different parts of the room. "Please do."

The sergeant looked embarrassed. "There isn't much to tell. There were a lot of traders coming in from over the border, making trouble with the Indians, selling them bad guns and worse whisky, and we got orders to stop it, so we did."

Mr. Thomson raised his hands and his eyes to heaven.

" 'So we did!' There it is in a nutshell. Still, you might give us a few romantic details, Stewart. You must admit the picture isn't highly colored."

Everyone laughed, including the sergeant himself.

"Oh, well," he said reluctantly, "if you really want it, here goes. I was young then, just enlisted, and wild to think we were going on such an adventure—seven hundred and fifty miles of prairie, hill, and river, with never a road or a trail. And perhaps a fight at the end. Or before the end, if we ran into hostile Indians."

"How many of you were there?" asked Kent.

"Two hundred. And a queer-looking outfit we were." The sergeant grinned at the recollection. "You see, the idea was that we should open up the country for settlement, establish law and order, placate the Indians, get rid of the firewater that was said to be ruining them—just a few things like that. So, as well as guns, we took oxen, cows, plows, harrows, mowing machines, and what not. All we needed was a sunbonnet or two to complete the picture. As it was, anyone could have taken us for a cross between a covered-wagon outfit and a military expedition. That is, if there had been anyone to see. But we didn't pass a single human habitation in the whole trip, barring a few tepees. A mile and a half we strung out at the beginning of the day's march, and after an axle or two had been broken in the rough ground—well, you can imagine."

The speaker ended abruptly, as if ashamed of having talked so long.

"What did you have to eat?" Peter's eyes had never left the sergeant.

"Buffalo, young sir, buffalo and again buffalo. There were plenty of them, then."

"Did you fight the Indians?" the boy persisted.

"You might say we fought for them. Anyhow, in a year we had driven out the whisky traders and stopped the raiding across the border. The Indians knew we were their friends. One old chief said, 'The Police have protected us as the feathers of the bird protect it from the frosts of winter.' Poetic, eh?"

Sergeant Stewart was warmed up by now, willing to talk or answer questions. Ronald was the first to speak. "What a lark it must have been," he exclaimed. "Do you think I'll ever have such a chance?"

"Maybe, who knows? There's a lot of unexplored country up north. But at that time the boundary between Canada and the States wasn't even settled. There was a commission working on it when we started."

"No wonder," Mr. Thomson threw in, "that it took the Indians some time to realize that there was a boundary and that they belonged on one side or the other of it."

"Yes, we were always having to send wandering bands back or bringing wandering bands home. The United States Army used to be a bit surprised when they found a couple of Mounted Police ready to take over an unruly crowd of young bucks that they'd used half a troop of

cavalry to escort as far as the border." The sergeant chuckled. "But that was our way, to go on prestige. And it worked, it worked," he concluded reminiscently.

There was a clatter at the door and in walked Dr. Tilton rubbing his hands. "Too late for everything?" he asked, eying the denuded table.

"Never too late for you!" Phyllis jumped up and took his cap and coat. "I'll heat up the coffee in a jiffy. Sit here by the stove and get warm."

"Can't resist you, my dear. But just ten minutes, and then we must be off." The doctor passed his hand across his forehead, settled back in his chair, and stretched out his hands to the warmth of the stove. "This is solid comfort. Had a good time, you young people?"

"Splendid!" "Lovely!" "Ripping!" came from all parts of the room.

"So, I guess, were the eats by the look of that table. Maggie Thomson, do I see a piece of your coconut cake? Well for you, my lass, that you saved it. Not another pill or bottle of physic would you ever have had from me if you'd let them gobble up the last crumb."

The departure of the Tiltons was the sign for the assemblage to break up.

"Well, what do you think of a Canadian surprise party?" Mrs. Thomson asked Phyllis as she tucked napkins and plates into her basket.

"I never had so much fun in my life. It was just too wonderful of you—because it *was* you who planned it,

wasn't it?" The girl threw her arms round the older woman and kissed her gratefully.

"Good-by, Phyllis. Good-by, Berry. Good-by, Kent." They trooped out. Ronald held back until the last. "May I come again very soon?" he whispered, his head close to hers. She nodded and pushed him toward the door as Sergeant Stewart's voice was heard outside calling impatiently, "Aren't you coming, Taylor!"

CHAPTER XII

A Proposal on Snowshoes

The surprise party had come off in the nick of time. The skaters had hardly reached their various homes when the moon disappeared behind storm clouds and snow began to fall. All that night and all the next day it feathered down, and when the moon again struggled out, its light fell on a snowy expanse broken only by the thin line of the barbed-wire fence around the pasture field.

Such a winter world Phyllis had never known. English snow she had seen, blackened almost as soon as it fell by the smoke of many chimneys, but never snow like this that lay day after day white and sparkling under a deep blue sky. She thought it even more beautiful in the evening. Then, for a few fleeting moments, as the sun neared the horizon, the sculptured waves of whiteness turned to an ethereal rose and lavender that always made her think of angels' wings. As for the night, it was hardly night at all. The northern sky was always strangely luminous, even when no aurora shot its green and rosy fingers to the zenith.

The cows stayed in the stable now, or else in the fold yard sunning themselves. There was no more pasture for

the big teams or for Gray Lady. Only Topsy and Turvey, hardy native-borns, could paw away the snow to find the succulent grass beneath. The wagon box came off its wheels and was dropped onto bobs, the buckboard wheeled into a shed and its shafts lifted upright, there to await the spring thaw. In its place the cutter, gracefully curved to resemble a swan, stood ready for winter driving.

Pip Crow lived in his wicker cage in the stable. Following Kent's advice Phyllis had shut him up at the time the wild crows were flying south, lest he should be tempted to follow them. That danger over, on fine days he was out, perching on the roof of the house in the sunshine, mimicking all the farm animals.

Phyllis put on moccasins and tried her new snowshoes. She soon caught the trick of lapping one shoe over the other and dragging the tails. The moccasins, with three or four pairs of stockings inside them, kept her much warmer than the fur-lined boots Uncle Henry had sent her from England. And how she did enjoy the suppleness of that soft wear. It was pure delight to cross the thongs of the snowshoes over her instep, and round her ankles, and strike across country, her cheeks bathed by the clear cold air and all her body aglow with the exercise.

"Winter is the best of all," she told herself, unaware that the real winter was still to come.

One evening about a week after the surprise party when, outside, the stars shone brilliantly over the snowy

plain and, inside, the three had settled down to read or talk, Phyllis picked out at random one of the books on Kent's shelf. It was a collection of songs and lyrics, and as she idly turned the pages looking for old favorites, her own name jumped out at her.

"Phyllis is my only joy," she read. Why, wasn't that the poem Ronald had teased her about? But someone had underlined the words in pencil. She read the poem through. It wasn't, as Ronald had warned her, too complimentary in parts. Still, there it was underlined. Who had done it? Hardly Ronald, for she had never known him to take down a book. She glanced doubtfully at Kent, but he and Berry were deep in a discussion of farm plans. Oh, well, it was probably an old mark and just a coincidence that it happened to be her name. She turned the page and found on the other side one of her best-loved lyrics.

"Stone walls do not a prison make," she read, lingering over the words and delighting in them, and was immediately conscious of Kent's voice urging the building of a new fence next spring to extend the pasture field. Shut it out and concentrate on the lines—

Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for a hermitage:
If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone—

"—just as soon as the ground is dry enough. Fifty acres more in the northeast corner would just about round us out, don't you think?"

Phyllis threw down the book in despair. Angels indeed! Was there no end to this talk of plowing and fencing, and goodness knows what? The worst of it was she couldn't help listening with one ear, because in a way she was interested—if only they wouldn't go on and on.

No one had noticed her impatient action. She let the book lie where it had fallen and picked up her knitting. Now the men were talking about the Legislative Assembly which soon was to take the place of the present-day Northwest Council for the Territories.

"Difficult to make it representative in a country so sparsely settled," she heard Kent remark. "But they say that as soon as any thousand miles has a thousand inhabitants it is to be entitled to a member."

"Sounds fair enough." This from Berry.

To Phyllis it sounded ridiculous. She couldn't help giggling to herself as she pictured a great flat country, marked off into squares like an enormous chessboard, with one individual standing in the middle of each square, waiting to elect a representative! She knitted another round, then threw up her head, for her ears had caught the rhythmic jingle of sleigh bells, growing louder with each moment. Even the men stopped to listen.

"Joe, I guess," said Berry, jumping up to look out of the window.

Ronald, more likely, thought Phyllis secretly, come to finish what he didn't have a chance to tell me.

A low red cariole stopped at the door, and out stepped Constable Taylor, natty as ever in the short buffalo coat and yellow-tabbed astrakhan cap of the winter uniform.

"Too fine a night to stay indoors!" he exclaimed, throwing the robe over the horse. "I thought I'd amble over here and see if anyone felt like a moonlight tramp. It's just rising now, big as a dinner plate."

"Oh, lovely! Let's all go," cried Phyllis as Taylor came into the room, stamping the snow off his feet. "You will, Berry? You'd like to, Kent, wouldn't you?" She looked hopefully from one to another. "But have you got snowshoes, Ronald?"

"No-o. I thought maybe I could borrow a pair here." He looked down at his feet, clad in heavy deerskin moccasins and up at the wall where two pairs of snowshoes hung crossed.

"You can have mine," offered Kent. "I don't care to go out again, anyway."

"Sure?" Ronald didn't hesitate long. "Well, then, thanks awfully. . . . Ready, Phyllis? . . . Aren't you coming either, Vernon?"

Berry shook his head and shut the door after them. Presently he stepped to the window and grinned to see Taylor down on his knees in the snow tying on Phyllis's snowshoes.

"You're not going to let her go out alone with that fellow at this time of night, are you?" asked Kent sharply.

Berry turned in surprise. "Why not? Taylor's all right. Do I want to be a spoilsport?"

Kent shrugged. "All right. She's your sister, not mine."

Berry opened his mouth to reply, but shut it again without saying anything, though his eyes gleamed with amusement.

Peals of laughter came from the outside as the two venturers, crouched and holding onto the tails of their snowshoes, disappeared down the steep bank to the creek bed. A minute later they could be seen climbing the opposite slope.

"Wouldn't it have been a shame to waste a night like this?" Phyllis exclaimed. "And if you hadn't come, I suppose I should have just stuck indoors, reading or listening to farm talk till bedtime. What made you think of it?"

"Well, last night I was outside our shack looking at the moonlight on the woods, and wishing you were there to see it, too. Then I thought, well, moonlight's moonlight, lovely everywhere, and it occurred to me to borrow that cariole, and we might have a bit of a tramp and then. . . ." He stopped, confused.

"Good for you." She smiled up at him. "It must be beautiful, though, in the woods, with the shadows of the bare boughs on the snow. I'd love to see it sometime. It's queer how moonlight gives one a feeling of magic, isn't it? As if anything wonderful might happen— Oh, look!"

Not fifty feet away from where they stood, a bar of silver, upright on the whiteness, suddenly spread snowy

wings and sailed away. "An owl!" they both exclaimed, and breathless watched the great bird fade into the night.

"He must have seen us all the time," said Ronald.

A few steps more and a jackrabbit, white on the white snow, popped up almost under their feet and bounded away, hardly visible except for his moving shadow.

"He was hiding from the owl, I do believe, keeping so quiet there," said Phyllis. "I'm glad we scared it away. I don't like things to be killed, do you, Ronald? . . . Perhaps we shall see a fox," she went on in a minute as Ronald made no reply. "There are lots about, they steal the chickens. The other night we saw four or five all at once. They were playing together in the creek bed just like puppies. The three of us lay in the snow and watched them. They looked too sweet and furry for anything."

"Did you let them get away?"

"Berry wanted to shoot them, but I begged him not to. He said it was chickens or foxes, but he didn't shoot, and I don't think he really wanted to, either."

They tramped on until even the glow of the house lamp was lost to sight. Everywhere it seemed as light as day, yet nothing could be seen. The crisping of the snow under their feet was the only sound in the intense stillness. There was an almost weird beauty in the scene. Phyllis was silent. Ronald, also, usually so talkative, seemed disinclined to speak. It was queer for him to be so quiet. Does he mean to tell me that "particular thing" tonight, she wondered. And is that bothering him?

A tiny night breeze, springing suddenly from nowhere, stirred the tassel of her stockinette cap and broke up the magic of the moment.

"Race you to the corner of the fence," she cried, and without waiting for a reply, started off at her best speed, stumbling and almost tripping herself up in her haste to get there first. Yet when she arrived, panting, Ronald was there before her.

"Wait until you have to wear skirts," she exclaimed, vexed at being so easily beaten.

"Heaven forbid." He laughed.

They leaned across the top scantling, resting, and again fell silent.

Now he'll tell me if he's ever going to, thought Phyllis. Perhaps he means to get out of the Police and go back home.

Constable Taylor seemed to make a great effort. Still leaning on the fence with one elbow, he turned to her. "Phyllis, will you marry me?"

She stared at him in blank astonishment. Whatever she may have expected, it wasn't this. He was joking, surely. But he didn't look as if he were joking. Still, how could he possibly be in earnest? Why, he wasn't twenty yet—a boy. Even to her who was two years his junior, he seemed awfully young. He was her friend and always great fun—but marrying! She stood there speechless and embarrassed while his eyes besought her.

At last, "What do you mean?" she faltered.

"What do I mean? Don't you know? Haven't you guessed? I mean that you are the sweetest, darlingest thing on earth and that I love you."

The girl was still too shaken to answer. "It's a proposal!" she told herself. "A real proposal!" A thrilling thought, but one that made her tremble. It was hard to know what to say.

"We are friends, real friends, aren't we?" she said at last in a low voice.

"Ah, friends, yes. But I mean something different. Every time I come here, I love you more. And how do you think I feel to see you slaving from morning to night, you, washing! . . . I tell you," he went on stormily, "I want to marry you and take you home to England, right away from this farm where you don't belong any more than a . . . than a hummingbird . . . in a chicken run."

Phyllis nearly burst out laughing at this picture of herself. But he was so deadly in earnest, she had to smother down her amusement.

"Say that you love me, too, Phyllis, darling Phyllis," he begged.

"But I don't," she blurted out, too startled to put it less crudely. And then, seeing how his face fell—"But I do like you. I like you most awfully. Isn't that enough? Can't we just be friends?"

He seemed to turn away from her in the moonlight. She heard him swallow hard. Then he took her two hands in his. "I didn't really expect that you could love me now,"

he said so humbly and so unlike his usual impudent self that the girl's heart smote her. "But why can't you learn to? Will you try, Phyllis? Please say you'll try." Gently releasing one of her hands from its mitt, he laid it against his breast and covered it with both of his own.

Phyllis looked up at him and down again in confusion. What could she say? How could she promise? Yet Ronald's eyes were on her anxiously. It was dreadful to have to disappoint him. At last she stammered out, "I don't know how to try. I don't believe people can love anyone by trying, but if you like . . . I'll try to try. Is that any good?"

"I suppose it's better than nothing, but try hard, darling." His arm stole round her waist. "Will this help you?" And he made as though to kiss her.

She drew back. "No, Ronald, please—I couldn't." She hesitated. "Hadn't we better go back now?"

He did not press her. Soberly, with one accord, they turned homeward, Phyllis wondering what she ought to say, and in the end saying nothing. Only when they reached the house was the silence broken.

"Say good night to the others for me, will you?" said Ronald. "I'd better get right along. I'm supposed to be back by ten."

He settled himself in the cariole, drew the rug over his knees, and gathered up the reins. "Good night, darling," he said softly, looking up at her as she stood in the snow beside the cariole. Then the old laughing light came back

into his eyes. "Won't it be splendid, Phyllis," he cried, "when you've learned to love me!"

A flourish of the whip, and the chestnut jumped into action. "Keep on trying!" floated back to her over the thin moonlit air.

CHAPTER XIII

Lost in a Blizzard

It was December before the real cold struck. Then one morning Phyllis woke to find the world blotted out. The wind was howling and shrieking round the house, filling the air with snow. It was bitter cold. A hole scratched in the fur of frost on the window showed only a raging maelstrom outside. After she was dressed she turned back to her room to put on felt overshoes and wind a knitted muffler round and round her neck and chest before venturing into the kitchen to see about breakfast.

Berry had raked out the ashes and shaken down the stoves earlier, but still the thermometer over the kitchen table registered only twenty-four degrees. When Phyllis attempted to slice the breakfast bacon, the knife burned her hand like a flame. Even the plates were so cold she must use a cloth to lift them from the shelf to warm at the back of the stove. With a knife dipped in hot water, she cut the solidified butter into cubes, dropping them into lukewarm water to soften.

No porridge this morning, she decided. It took too long, and the sooner she could get out of this kitchen the better. But lots of bacon and toast and coffee. And pull the

table in the sitting room close to the red-hot little stove.

It was something of a surprise to find that the milk in the cellar was not frozen like everything in the kitchen. It felt almost comfortable down there after the frigid air above. Skimming the cream off the big pans, she recalled how in summer she used to come to this very spot to get cool, and now she was lingering here for warmth.

After breakfast the two men fought their way to the stable, steering by the garden fence, and Phyllis set herself to wash the dishes. They froze to the draining tray before she was ready to wipe them. She was glad to cut her usual work short and take refuge in the comparative warmth of the sitting room.

All day, and for three days and nights, the storm raged. Now and then a brief lull in the fury of the wind showed a glimpse of blue sky, hidden again instantly by the driving snow. By afternoon the temperature in the kitchen rose to forty degrees, but dropped again after the fire was banked for the night. Phyllis kept a brick in the oven all day and at night wrapped it in a flannel petticoat and put it in her bed. The drifts about the house grew and grew. The granary and wagon shed were half covered; the stable door had constantly to be dug out.

There was no hope of visitors in weather like this, even visitors who did not take much account of weather. Twice, since that memorable moonlight walk, Ronald had driven up in the red cariole. Once he had come alone and once with Sergeant Stewart. Each time it had been at night,

and he had not even tried to see her alone. Instead, he had got them all singing, and was such good company and seemed so lighthearted that she almost accused herself of imagining that surprising proposal. Almost, but not quite, for there was the moment when he had whispered, "Are you still trying, Phyllis?" She thought about him often and wondered what it would be like to be in love and how she would know if she were. Certainly she liked him very much and looked forward to his visits. The secret understanding between them thrilled her. She tried to imagine herself married to him and living in England in that beautiful home which he talked about so often. What an easy life that would be! Such a contrast to the Pile o' Bones Farm. But she couldn't make it seem quite real. After all, the great point was, did she love Ronald enough to want to spend her life with him? And honestly, she didn't know. She couldn't even be sure that she was "trying," as she had promised. For the present, at least, he could not come to ask her, and this was almost a relief.

On the second day of the storm Phyllis went with Kent down to the stable. She wanted to see what a blizzard was like when you were out in it. It was certainly like nothing she had ever experienced in her English life. Even with the fence to cling to, and Kent's tall figure before her as a shield, she could barely force her way forward. When she opened her lips, the wind snatched her breath away. Through the muffler, her nose stung as though just about to freeze. She could feel her nostrils icing over.

"Well, how about it?" asked Kent as they struggled through the stable door together and forced it shut. The stable was built half below ground and half above, and so was partly sheltered from the winter storms. All the animals, kept under one roof for the sake of warmth, had their own places in it.

"A little goes a long way," Phyllis panted in reply. She pushed down the muffler, already icy from her breath, and tenderly felt her nose and cheeks. "I shan't go back until you do."

"I wouldn't let you. Now you are here, how about giving me a hand with the work?"

Phyllis didn't particularly want to. She was still a little afraid of a horse in his stall—afraid of being stepped on or crowded to the side of the narrow space. Besides, she disliked having to be careful where she put her feet—and there was bound to be manure where there were animals. But Kent was looking at her with that amused smile that seemed to read her thoughts and that sometimes made her furious. So she swallowed her repugnance, and under his direction measured oats, forked down hay, carried water from the barrels to the horses and cattle in their stalls, put out grain for the hens in their inside run, and meal and skim milk for the two half-grown pigs. She learned where the feed was kept and how much to allow each animal. Later in the winter she was to be glad of that lesson.

At last the storm blew itself out, and was followed by

clear sunny days. It was cold, of course, but there was all the difference in the world between twenty or thirty below zero in a storm and the same temperature when there was no wind. On such a day Phyllis would positively glow with heat on her snowshoeing expeditions, and had to be warned that she might freeze her nose or an exposed ear without being aware of it.

One afternoon she discovered fresh fox tracks in the bed of the creek and decided it would be fun to follow them. Perhaps she might come on the fox himself unaware. Pulling on black woolen tights that came to her ankles and were warmer than half a dozen petticoats, she buttoned herself into her blanket coat, drew her sealskin cap over her ears, and tied a knitted muffler round her waist for use in case it turned colder. Badger mitts completed the costume, and she felt armored against any possible change in temperature.

Berry, mending a fence, saw her set out on snowshoes and shouted to her not to go too far. She saw him wave an arm round the sky, but to her eyes it seemed perfectly clear and unclouded, and she soon forgot his warning.

The tracks—there were several of them—ran along the creek, and sometimes broke into confused circles, as though the little creatures had stopped to play. Phyllis was sure they must be the same foxes as the ones she had seen gamboling in the moonlight earlier in the winter. Now and then the tracks led up onto the top and she climbed the slope only to find that a few yards farther on she must slide

down again. Now and then, too, they divided and she had to decide which ones to follow.

She was so intent on her tracking that on one of her expeditions to the level, she was startled actually to see what she had been looking for—a live fox. He appeared suddenly from behind a billow of snow, stared at her for a moment, and then bounded away across the prairie.

Instantly she dashed after him, though she knew very well it was a hopeless quest. The fox knew it, too, and did not trouble himself to hurry. He ran a hundred yards or so, then sat down on his haunches, looked back and seemed to grin. On she came, hotfoot, the fox loping off in a leisurely manner as soon as she drew near. This tantalizing performance was repeated several times. He might have been laughing at a girl in a red coat trying to catch him—a red fox!

"All right," said Phyllis, half to him and half to herself, "even if I can't come up with you, I may track you to your hole." Farther and farther she went, without any attention to time or even to direction.

It must have been an hour later, when the fox was completely lost to sight, that she noticed that the shadows were no longer blue. Glancing up at the sky, she was dismayed to see that it also had changed. The blue had given way to a sort of silver-gray through which the sun shone whitely. The air was full of ice particles, and there was a ring round the sun.

Phyllis knew what that meant. There was no time to

lose. Already little puffs of wind were beginning to raise the fine snow and drive it along the prairie like smoke. She must hurry home. But which way was home? Where was the creek? It was nowhere in sight; she had left it long ago, following the fox. She must go back on her tracks until she struck it—and hurry.

Keeping an apprehensive eye on the fading sun, she sped along, tripping over her snowshoes in her haste. The snowshoe marks she was following were becoming fainter and fainter as the snow drifted over them. At last they were completely lost. She looked back at the tracks just made and tried to keep the same direction, but she was far from sure that either the fox or she had been traveling in a straight line.

Meanwhile the wind was rising and carrying the snow higher into the air. With a pang of fear she realized that she was in a desperate situation. If she did not find the creek, she might never get home. She tried to run, but could not manage her snowshoes. "What a fool! What a fool!" she groaned from time to time. "Berry warned me." She stopped, partly to get her breath, partly to strain her eyes for some landmark. But nothing was to be seen. Only the clouds of snow above and the drifts of snow below. On again, terrified now. She felt the bite of the cold and stopped to wind the muffler round her face and neck, leaving only her eyes exposed.

Suddenly the creek bed opened at her feet. "Thank God," she breathed. But then a new doubt assailed her.

Which way to turn? She had climbed in and out of that creek bed so often on her outward way that she couldn't remember for the life of her whether she ought to go right or left. To turn the wrong way now would be fatal; the creek might only lead her farther and farther away from home.

Every minute the storm was growing worse. She could not see the sun at all for the blowing snow. There was not even that to guide her. "I must be calm," she told herself, summoning her courage. "I must think." But it was very hard to think with the wind and snow coming at her like wild beasts. What would Berry do if he were in her place? It flashed into her memory that once, riding across country with her, he had guided himself by the wind on his cheek. The wind had been from the northwest when she set out, she was sure of that. It was hardly likely to have changed. Besides, that was the direction storms came from. In that case, she must turn left. It would mean facing the storm, but that couldn't be helped, and if she kept down in the bed of the creek she ought to find a little shelter.

The air was now so thick with snow that she could not even see the lay of the bank at her feet. Never mind, she must get down. She crouched and slid—and slid right over an overhanging lip of snow into nothingness. She landed heavily and rolled over. The snowshoe had wrenched one foot in her fall. She began to untie the thong to ease her foot, but the snow at once began to drift against her and she hastily tied it again and forced herself to go on. The

foot was painful, but she could walk. Her hands now were cold; she bitterly regretted having taken them out of the badger mitts to fumble with the thongs. Once chilled it was hardly possible to get them warm again.

The going was a little better down where she was now, but the creek wound about so much it was going to double or treble the distance. Still, it was safer. If only she could rest for a minute, get out of the wind for a breathing space. But it tore at her; icy particles streamed into her face, stinging through the folds of the muffler. Every now and then she rubbed the fur mitt over her face fearing some part of it might be frozen. She dared not risk a bare hand to find out.

She must rest a minute. A sort of shallow cave under the bank seemed to offer a little shelter. She sank down exhausted. Oh, what heaven to be out of the wind! If only she dared lie down and sleep! But she knew better than that. With all her will power she forced herself to stay on the alert, but rest for a minute she must, or give up.

Up again, and struggling on, sorely tempted to leave the creek and cut across country, but resisting the temptation. Now and then she felt a terrible fear that, after all, she had turned the wrong way. It took all her courage to fight back panic. Her strength was ebbing; she could hardly make her legs move. But, head down, she bucked the wind step by weary step.

Suddenly she stopped in her tracks. What was that? It sounded like a pistol shot. She heard it again. It was, it

must be, a pistol shot. Someone was looking for her! Life flowed back into her limbs. She tried to shout, but the wind tore the sound from her lips and scattered it. Oh, they mustn't miss her! She forced her way up out of the creek bed, and looked wildly round. Nothing in sight but the madly whirling snow. She shouted again, and this time surely there was an answering call. A figure emerged. Another moment and she was clinging to Berry, sheltered against his coat. She was saved!

With Berry's arm around her and Berry's encouraging words in her ear, she was able to stumble on, and only collapsed as they reached the door. He carried her in and, laying her on the sofa, stripped off mitts and stockings. Thank God, her hands and feet were not frozen. But as warmth came back into her members the pain was excruciating; she could not bear him to touch them.

The tea he brought revived her, and as soon as the pain abated, she dropped off into a delicious drowsiness. She felt her brother draw the blanket closer, heard his voice in the kitchen in tones of sharp relief, and Kent's voice in reply, and was lost to the world.

CHAPTER XIV

A Reproof and a Quarrel

Next day Phyllis still felt the effects of her exposure. She was tired, too tired to set about anything active, and sat sewing, or trying to sew, near the stove. But often the needle dropped from her listless hand and a nervous shiver passed through her frame. She could not keep her thoughts off yesterday's experience and her narrow escape. The sound of the wind howling round the corner of the house made her shudder. What a country! A frightening country with its storms, its fierce heat in summer, its deadly cold in winter. Why did people choose to live in such a place? Why had *she* chosen to come here? She felt young and helpless and sorry for herself.

"They expect too much of me," she complained, and hastily brushed a tear aside as Kent came into the room and reached for the tobacco jar. After he had filled his pipe he did not go, but stood fidgeting with the cartridge shells on the bookcase. He seemed to have something on his mind.

Suddenly he plunked himself down in a chair opposite Phyllis and said without preamble, "I suppose you know

Berry risked his life for you yesterday." His tone was abrupt. It acted on her like a tonic.

"He did not," she replied indignantly. "He wouldn't be so silly. He was close to home. I could have made it alone. He said so."

" 'Close to home' means nothing in a blizzard. You ought to know that. And he *is* silly where you are concerned. He babies you, if you'll pardon my saying so."

Phyllis was furious. Of all the outrageous. . . .

"I'm glad *you* didn't give yourself any trouble, anyhow," she retorted, trying to keep back the angry tears.

"Never mind what I did," he replied grimly—and it was not until much later that she learned that he too had been out in the storm looking for her—"the thing for you to keep in mind is that you can't afford to take chances in this climate. There was no need for you to be caught like that if you had been reasonably careful." He stood up to go. "Now I've said what I wanted to say, and I'm afraid I've made you angry."

Phyllis bounded to her feet. "Just wait a minute before you go, Mr. Kent Averill. What right have to come in here and lecture me? I could say a few things to *you.*"

"Oh, yes? What are they? Go ahead." The ghost of an amused smile flitted across his face. It maddened Phyllis.

"Why are you here at all? That's something I should like to know. I came out here to be with my brother, and here you were whether I liked it or not." Kent's smile was

wiped out. "And not only that—you have no consideration, either of you. Babying, did you say? You let me do everything, everything, both of you, even carry water. And what do you talk about? Farm, nothing but farm! I'm sick of the whole thing. I wish I were back in England." Phyllis's voice was mounting to hysterical heights, and she stamped her foot. "No, don't touch me," as he took a step forward, consternation written all over him. "I tell you I don't want anything more to do with you. You criticized me from the first day, and I think you are horrid!"

Her voice broke on the last word and she burst into violent sobbing. Kent was speechless with dismay. At his first attempt to say something, Phyllis pushed past him into her bedroom and slammed the door.

"Whew!" he exclaimed and rubbed the back of his hand over his forehead. "Whew!"

Smothered sobs came from within the bedroom. Kent was aghast. What had he done, what stupid thing had he said to upset her like this? It was true he had called her down, had done it purposely. She was too careless and some day she'd get hurt. But he never meant to be unkind or to stir up such a tempest. An impulse to open that firmly shut door came to nothing; he hadn't the nerve. So, she resented his being here, and he had never guessed it, never guessed it. He paced up and down the room, his brows knitted.

Berry, coming in the back door, called out, "Why the long face?"

"I've hurt your sister's feelings," returned Kent heavily, and told Berry what had happened.

Berry laid a hand on the older man's shoulder. "Just tantrums," he said. "Don't worry, old chap. She's upset from yesterday's affair. She didn't mean a word of it."

Twenty minutes later, however, Berry came out of his sister's room with a worried expression on his usually cheerful face. "It's all right," he whispered. "She feels just as bad as you do. We're to get supper ready, so come on."

Meanwhile Phyllis, in her room, was desperately dashing cold water over her face, trying to remove traces of her outburst. She felt shattered by the storm of sobs and now that the paroxysm was over she was beginning to feel ashamed of herself. Berry had been sweet, but underneath his comforting words, she had sensed his dismay. It was all true in a way, what she had said—that was the worst of it. She *had* had to accept Kent's presence whether she liked it or not; there *was* too much farm talk; he *did* criticize her—now and then, at least. But as for not wanting to have anything more to do with him—it made her sick to think she had said that.

How could she ever have the face to see him again after such a display of temper? Yet she would have to. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Phyllis sat down before her mirror. Her face was white and miserable. She began to comb out her disheveled hair, looking at her image disconsolately with big gray eyes.

"Supper!" Berry's voice, hearty and loud, outside the

door, startled her. She couldn't go looking like this. Perhaps she would be less ghastly in the velveteen. It took only a couple of minutes to change, but for another minute she hung onto the doorknob trying to summon courage to turn it. Now for it!

She had meant to walk boldly into the sitting room and take her place at the table as though nothing had happened, but in spite of herself, her shoulders drooped, her knees shook, and her eyes simply would not lift themselves. If she had only known, Kent was dreading the meeting as much as she. Throughout the meal they avoided speaking directly to one another. Now and then one stole a look at the other, and on one of these occasions their glances met. Instantly both looked away. It fell to Berry to do the talking, and he carried on in his usual lighthearted way. Nothing depressed Berry for long, and though he had been rather upset by Phyllis's confession, the quarrel already seemed rather amusing. They'd soon get over it, but meantime, he chuckled, they certainly were in a dither.

A knocking at the storm porch and the sound of snowshoes being set up against the wall relieved the situation. The door opened and in walked Joe Perkins. Clad in a short buffalo coat—a castoff Mounted Police uniform—bound round the waist with a bright red sash, red woolen stockings outside his trousers, and high moccasins, he was a decorative if diminutive figure. A waft of cold air came in with him. Something else entered at the same time, a breezy common sense that seemed to clear the atmosphere.

"The wind's all gone, and the northern lights are a fair treat," declared the little man, pulling off his bearskin cap. "I thought I'd tramp over and see how everybody was, especially the young lydy 'ere." He shook hands with Phyllis. " 'Ad yer nose froze yet, miss?" he asked, winking at her. "You're half a tenderfoot, you know, until then."

Blessed Joe! Phyllis was able to wink back as she replied, "Pretty nearly. Both cheeks anyhow. Won't that do instead?"

"Good enough for a starter," he admitted, settling down to his pipe, and refusing the cup of tea offered him. Nothing was said about Phyllis's late experience in the storm, although the talk naturally turned on the weather.

"Haven't seen you this long while," said Berry. "Been to town lately?"

"Not to town, to the barracks," replied Joe. "Took a few dozen eggs and sold 'em like 'ot cakes. Enough to keep me in groceries for a month. Picked up a bit of news, too."

"Yes? What was that?"

"There's a new Police post opened near Prince Albert—at Carleton, I think. The fellow in command up there says the Indians are getting restless—Big Bear especially. Probably be trouble before long."

"What sort of trouble?" Phyllis sat forward in her chair, her pale face bent on Joe.

"Hard to say exactly, miss," replied Joe. "But don't you worry your little 'ead," he added considerately. "It's all

of two or three 'undred miles away from here—two or three 'undred miles of snow and blizzards, what's more."

Joe took a long pull at his pipe. "It's all along of that Indian-French-Scandinavian chap, Louis Riel, what calls 'imself a 'messiah.' Wants to get back the country for the Indians. Too late for that, I'd say."

"Why, I never thought of that," said Phyllis slowly. "I suppose they do think it is their country."

"Rather natural, ain't it?" Joe smiled at her.

The talk turned on troubles with the Indians in old days. When at last the visitor rose to go, Kent got up too. "If you don't mind waiting a minute," he said, "I'll get on my snowshoes and go with you part way. A breath of air before turning in." He looked at Phyllis. "Want to come too, see the northern lights?"

Phyllis gasped. She opened her mouth to say no, then shut it. This must be an olive branch. She'd better grasp it. Kent, watching her too-expressive face, read the thoughts passing over it, and added, "It would brace you up. Come along."

Berry, with an inward chuckle, declined to join the party —said he was getting old and lazy and would sit by the stove and read a good book. He chose to ignore the beseeching look Phyllis sent in his direction, and the three set out without him.

Joe kept up a cheerful chatter as they tramped three abreast over the dimly illumined snow, and if Phyllis was unusually silent, he did not seem to notice. Her thoughts

were busy with the homeward journey when Joe would have left them. What was she going to say? She had no idea. What was Kent going to say? She dreaded it.

He surprised her by beginning at once to talk about ordinary things—the jackrabbit that jumped up at their feet, the trip to town that he and Berry were planning, the antics of Pip Crow. He made it all as natural as though there had never been that ghastly quarrel. Evidently he did not mean to say anything about it. What a relief!

She followed his lead gratefully, but as they neared home and still were talking on indifferent subjects, she began to feel that, after all, this was only putting things off. She would have to say something sometime. So, just short of the house, she stopped and faced him.

"Kent," she began and stuck. She couldn't think just what to say. It flustered her still more to feel him looking at her in that friendly way, waiting, expecting her to say something, when it would serve her right if he . . . if he. . . . Suddenly she blurted out, "I was awfully rude to you, and hateful. Please forgive me."

"Let's make it mutual," he replied quickly. Now that she had opened the subject he no longer tried to evade it. "I've been blaming myself for what I said. So forgive me, too, if you can. I should have remembered what you had been through yesterday." He hesitated, then went on, "If you could put up with me till spring, perhaps then—"

"Oh, don't, don't," she cried, distressed. "Don't say that. You must believe me, I didn't mean a word of it. I

was just in a temper." She put out a hand and touched his sleeve. "You do believe me, don't you?"

"Ye-es," he replied, looking at her strangely. "I want to believe you all right, my dear."

My dear, he had called her "my dear." Then it was all right, he wasn't angry. She gave a big sigh of relief. "Well, then," she said happily, and turned homeward.

Berry, looking up from his magazine as they came in, felt quite sure that the skies had cleared.

CHAPTER XV

A Merry Christmas Indeed!

Only three days to Christmas. Kent and Berry were on their way to Regina, there to buy the Christmas turkey, if there was one to be had. But Phyllis was in the kitchen, and glad to be alone. She had lots to do. The Christmas cake was already in the oven, and now she was busy with individual mince pies. The kitchen for once was nice and warm, and she was thoroughly enjoying herself. Snatches of Christmas carols broke from her lips as she rolled her pastry.

Good King Wenceslaus went forth
On the feast of Stephen
And the snow lay all around,
Deep and crisp and even.

How often she had sung that carol in the dear little church at home, Mummy on one side of her, Berry home from school on the other, and Daddy at the end of the pew, looking festive with a sprig of holly in his buttonhole. Today, they seemed to be very near her; she could think of them without sadness.

Last Christmas had been so awful, it made her shiver to think of it. This year she was resolved it should be a happy

occasion for all three of them. Berry was entering into the spirit of the thing and had promised some surprises. Even Kent seemed to be looking forward to the day, said it would be the first real home Christmas he had had since he left his grandfather's farm at seventeen.

If Berry couldn't get a turkey, it would have to be some of the prairie chicken hanging frozen on the back of the house. In any case there would be mashed potatoes with lots of butter and cream, boiled onions, carrots out of the sand bin in the cellar, beet-and-cabbage salad, and mince pies with cheese. The crowning feature was to be the plum pudding which had been boiled a week ago, and now hung in its bag, ready to be heated up on the great day. She meant to bring it to table all aflame, in traditional style.

Her thoughts flew to Ronald. What a shame that he had to be on duty on Christmas of all days, especially when she was getting up such a grand dinner. Poor boy, a miserable Christmas for him. But not even pity for Ronald could dampen Phyllis's spirits today. She was bubbling with plans.

The baking was all done at last. The cake was marvelous. The mince pies—twelve of them in their little patty pans—looked so good they made her mouth water. Should she put some on the table for supper tonight, or keep them for Christmas Eve? Christmas Eve was the proper time of course. No, it was impossible to wait, she decided.

There was the sleigh at last! She could hear the jingle

of the bells. Berry came bursting in, his arms full of packages, and brought a stream of cold air in with him.

"We got the mail, and look, here's a box for you from Aunt Lydia and half a dozen letters and cards besides." He threw them down and hurried out, next time holding out at arm's length a fine turkey.

"Now it *is* Christmas!" Phyllis clapped her hands as she took the bird from her brother. "All dressed, too, and not even frozen. I'll put it right into the cellar so that it won't be like poor Mrs. Thomson's first Christmas turkey!"

At supper she looked over her Christmas cards and read one or two letters. There was a long one from Aunt Lydia on thin paper. This she laid aside, saying she would keep it until she had opened the box. And that wouldn't be until Christmas Day. But all through the meal that flat box lying on the sofa seemed to grow larger and larger. She tried to keep her eyes on her plate, but they were quite out of control and would go back again and again to the mysterious package.

"Oh, open the thing," cried Berry at last, "and be done with it."

"Shall I?" She needed nothing more but jumped up, cut the string, and tore off the brown paper. Layers and layers of tissue and yards of satin ribbon foamed up as she lifted the lid. "Oh, come and look, both of you. Isn't it be-ew-tifully wrapped!"

"Looks positively bridal," said Berry. "Better open it up

and find out if there isn't a bridegroom hidden under all that fluff."

Phyllis giggled, but she slowly untied the ribbons and opened the paper. There lay a white silk evening dress in all its freshness and purity.

"O-oh, o-oh," breathed the girl, lifting it from its wrappings and holding it up. First the bodice, cut with a round neck and short puff sleeves, and lacing down the back. Then the skirt, ankle length, slightly bunched up at the back. A sash of the same white silk hung from the waist at each side and tied in front at knee length. The silk glistened in the lamplight. Phyllis's eyes glistened, too. She gazed at it reverently.

Berry was poking in the box. "Here's something else—two things." One proved to be a pair of long white kid gloves; the other, marked "With love from Uncle Henry," a five-strand necklace of seed pearls in a red leather case.

"Could you imagine it?" exclaimed Phyllis, quite overcome. "Isn't it just too sweet of them both? I never dreamed Aunt Lydia could think of anything so lovely—and so frivolous!" She laid the dress carefully back in its box. "I'm going to sit right down and write to them." Then a dismaying thought struck her. "But when do you suppose I can wear it?"

"Don't worry about that," Berry reassured her. "The governor's pretty sure to give a ball before the winter's over, or if he doesn't, there will be some sort of a shindy

at the Mounted Police barracks. You'll get a chance to wear it, never fear."

"You'd see me all decked out in it for Christmas dinner, if I didn't happen to be the cook," the girl declared laughing, as she took a last lingering look at the silken folds.

That Christmas dinner, alas, never came off.

Next afternoon, as Phyllis was busily making butter, Kent came in at the kitchen door and passed her without a word. His face was pale and he looked queer. Puzzled, she tiptoed toward the sitting room, and saw him slumped in a chair, with closed eyes, his fur cap still on his head. In spite of the warmth of the room, he was shivering. His teeth chattered. She stared at him in dismay. He was ill! With some difficulty, for as soon as she came into the room, he tried to stand up and declared he was all right, she persuaded him to lie down on the sofa, and covered him with blankets. But still he shook. Next, she filled a stone ginger ale bottle with hot water, and pulling off his overshoes against his protest, put it against his feet.

By and by he stopped shivering, but within a few minutes was burning with fever. Phyllis was sure he ought to be in bed, but he had sunk into a sort of stupor, from which she hesitated to rouse him. When Berry came at her call, he was as much alarmed as she had been.

They did eventually get him to bed, Berry helping him to undress. He asked for water, but would take nothing else, not even the weak tea Phyllis made.

"Don't look so scared, Phyl," said Berry, as they sat down at last to a belated supper. "Everyone has to be sick sometime. He'll probably be all right in the morning."

But he wasn't. He still had a fever and seemed very weak. Phyllis brought warm water and sponged his face and hands. He accepted the service gratefully, after a half-hearted attempt to do it for himself. It seemed to soothe him. He drank a little milk.

About ten o'clock in the morning Berry called his sister downstairs. He looked pale. "Listen, Phyl," he said, "I believe I'm going to be ill, too. I feel like the deuce. If I'm taken like Kent, you put on your snowshoes like a good girl, and get Joe Perkins to come over tonight and tomorrow and milk and feed the stock. He's a good sort and will be glad to do it. Will you?"

"Of course I will, Berry," she replied. "Don't you worry. I'll get him all right. But don't be ill, please don't."

"I'll be all right in a few minutes." He sat heavily down in a chair. "We'll both be on deck for Christmas, you'll see." And he made a gallant attempt to give his cheerful smile. But even as he spoke he began to shake in a chill.

"You go up to bed this very minute, sir, before you get any worse. I'm going to bring you some hot brandy and water. I don't see why I didn't think of that yesterday."

"On deck for Christmas," she repeated to herself, as she mixed the hot drink. That was tomorrow! A queer kind of a Christmas it was going to be with two sick men on her

hands and a farm to look after! She allowed herself one moment's regret for the festivities she had planned and prepared for, then resolutely shut them out of her mind. The great thing now was how to get these sick people well. She gave Berry the same stiff dose of quinine he had prescribed for Kent the day before, and gave the regular dose to Kent himself. Then she waited anxiously while poor Berry shivered and shook. As soon as he was over his chill, she got out her snowshoes and prepared to tramp over to Joe Perkins's place a mile away across country. Kneeling on one knee in the snow to tie the thongs round her ankle, she cast an appraising eye on the sky. What she saw there brought her up standing. The blue was rapidly filming over and sundogs flanked the true sun on either side.

"My soul!" she exclaimed under her breath. "What next?" If she couldn't get Joe Perkins, then she was in a nice fix. Would she dare try, sundogs or no sundogs? Those signs didn't always mean storm—not quite always. There was a chance. And anyhow it might not come so soon, there might be time. The trip over wouldn't take more than half an hour at the most. She looked at the half-tied thong and hesitated. All her instinct was to risk it. But suppose the storm did swoop down suddenly, and she got hung up at Joe's, with no one to look after the two sick men. And suppose. . . . It was hardly a week since her terrible experience in the blizzard, and this time there would be no Berry to rescue her. It was Kent's words—

"There was no need for you to have been caught if you had been reasonably careful"—that decided her. She began slowly and reluctantly to untie her snowshoes.

"How I hate being 'reasonably careful'!" she exclaimed ruefully as she went back into the house.

It was still too early to milk or feed the animals, but she filled and trimmed the lantern and went down to the stable to see what needed to be done there. She found the water barrel almost empty and set to work to fill it before the storm should arrive, if it really meant to come. It took her a good many trips between the well and the stable, carrying two pails half full—all she could manage at a time—before the barrel was full. The last two pailfuls she carried to the house.

Her arms ached, and her hands tingled with the cold. She sat down to rest, but almost at once jumped up and ran upstairs to see how her patients were getting on.

"Is Joe coming?" were Berry's first words, as her head appeared above the stairs.

Phyllis thought quickly: If I say no, he'll try to get up. "Joe will be over in a little while," she declared without blinking, and hoped she might be forgiven the lie.

Berry sank back on his pillow relieved. "Take off this blanket, Phyl," he muttered, "it's so hot."

She saw that he was full of fever, as Kent had been yesterday, but instead of being in a stupor, he was thrashing about on his cot. She did not know which was the most alarming.

Kent called to her from his room beyond the partition. "Thirsty," he said feebly. She saw that his water glass was empty. "So sorry, tried to get up, couldn't make it."

"I'll bring you some," she said. "Don't try to move and don't worry. Joe Perkins is coming over to take care of everything, so you can rest easy. How about some lemonade?"

It was blowing, but not hard, when she went down to milk. She might after all have gone for Joe. But it was too late now. Luckily, Milly, the willful cow, was dry, and there was only the more obliging Daisy to deal with. She brought the milk up to the house, strained it into the flat pans, and carried them into the cellar. Then she hurried to the stable again. She had cleaned out Daisy's stall before milking, and now decided not to touch any of the other stalls until morning when the light would be better or she could get Joe. It was dark already outside—too late to water the animals at the trough—and it was slow work getting the water to them in pailfuls and waiting while they drank it. The way they insisted on pausing to rest in the middle of drinking was maddening. She went through the routine, all the time harassed by the thought that one or other of the sick men might be needing her.

Everything was finished at last, hay forked down, oats measured out, pigs fed, chickens shut up in their quarters. She took a last look round to make sure all was right and dropped the bolt on the stable door with a sigh of relief. "Shall I smell of horses and give myself away?" she won-

dered as half an hour later she carried tea and toast upstairs. But either she didn't or else her patients did not notice.

"Where have you been all this time?" asked Berry peevishly. "Didn't you hear me call?"

"Oh, Berry, did you call? I am sorry. I must have been outside. Did you want something?"

"I wanted to speak to Joe. Has he gone?" She nodded. "Tell him to be sure to see me in the morning, if I'm not up and around."

"Very well, but don't bother yourself, Berry dear. Everything is going on all right, truly it is."

Of the two, Kent seemed the sicker. He must be, or it would be he doing the worrying, not Berry. He lay very still, pale now instead of red, and evidently weak. He drank the tea she brought, gratefully, but still would not eat. "Great nuisance to you," he murmured apologetically as he dropped back on his pillow. "Awfully sorry." At once his eyes closed.

Phyllis felt her heart give a flutter of dismay. His pallor, his weakness were frightening. Suppose he should be really ill, dangerously ill. The thought startled her. It seemed incredible that anything like that could happen to Kent—strong, reliable, hard-working Kent. She passed into Berry's room. His face was still as red as fire. Could it be that they were both in for some dreadful sickness, and she all alone here and so ignorant of what to do? She longed for Dr. Tilton, but it was twelve miles to Regina, and

there was no way of reaching him. "Oh, somebody come!" she cried in her heart.

That night she dragged her bedclothes onto the sofa, so as to be within call from upstairs. She was so tired that for a moment she wondered if she too were going to be ill. "Not yet, I can't till they get better." She held on to that thought as she stretched her weary limbs between the blankets. Her prayers were a wordless supplication for strength for herself and health for "her two."

Christmas Eve! Listen to the wind howl round the house. The snow must be flying . . . how the white silk glistens . . . Turvey, stand over . . . mince pies . . . "Very early in the morning, very early Christ was born." She slept.

CHAPTER XVI

Running a Farm Singlehanded

The alarm clock clanging its summons at six o'clock woke Phyllis from a dream of the flower garden of her English home. She started up and rubbed her eyes, wondering where she was. Instead of the sunshine of her dream, everything was dark—dark and cold. It was the cold striking through her nightgown that brought her to a realization of her surroundings. Trying to recapture the dream, she snuggled down again into the bedclothes and closed her eyes. But in a flash the recollection of the sick men upstairs returned to her and, wide awake, she leaped out of bed. Feeling for the matches, she lighted the oil lamp on the table beside her and got quickly into her clothes.

The rattle and clatter of shaking down the stoves must surely have roused the sleepers. She tiptoed halfway upstairs and listened. Not a sound except Berry's even breathing. Good. He at least wasn't awake yet. They could wait.

She yawned as she buckled on high cloth overshoes and tied her blanket coat tightly round her waist. Fur cap well pulled down over her ears and forehead, and leather mitts on hands, she hurried down to the stable, carrying the

lantern in one hand and the milk pail in the other. It was very still and the stars bright in the sky. The only sound in the world seemed to be the crunch of the snow under her feet.

Last night's wind had packed the snow in tightly round the stable door and, struggle as she might, Phyllis could not open it. Back to the shed for pick and shovel, grudging every minute. The lantern, set on a drift, made a small illuminated spot in the midst of the darkness. Ice had formed beneath the door; it cracked and splintered slowly beneath the girl's unskillful attacks. As she paused to rest, a whinny from inside told her that Gray Lady was expecting her master.

The door gave way at last. Within, the air was warm and full of the mingled scents of milk, hay, and ammonia. Daisy was mooing impatiently. "All right, old thing," called Phyllis, "I'm coming." But the cow was unusually restless and the milking took so long that Phyllis, in a panic lest her patients should be calling her, postponed all the other work until later. The horses seemed to look reproachfully after her as she left them unfed and unwatered—on Christmas morning, too, if they only knew it, she thought ruefully, remembering for the first time what day it was.

When at last she got upstairs, she found to her intense relief that both Berry and Kent seemed somewhat better, but still strangely weak. Phyllis brought bread and milk and stood over them while they ate it—all the time think-

ing of the hungry animals still waiting for their breakfasts. Her own was taken in snatched mouthfuls.

"Don't forget I want to see Joe," Berry called after her in his weak voice as she disappeared down the stairs. So he hadn't forgotten, no such luck. She must go for Joe just as soon as she had done the most urgent of the chores.

An hour later she was at Joe Perkins's door. Even as she knocked, something told her that the house was empty. She looked in the shed—no sleigh, in the barn—no horse. Her heart sank. He must have gone away to spend Christmas, probably with some of his pals in the barracks. That meant he would be away all day—perhaps all night. Still, there were the chickens; he'd almost have to come back to feed them. Better leave word on the chance. But how? With the tail of her snowshoe she wrote a message on the snow, hoping that the drifts would not cover it before Joe's return.

"Well, there's nothing else for it, I'll just have to clean out the stalls myself. I suppose I can do it. A Christmas treat!" she added grimly, and turned homeward.

All that day she seemed to be alternately running down to the stable—it took her an hour to do what Berry accomplished in ten minutes—and running upstairs to wait on or cheer her invalids. And every time she visited them, if only for a minute, she had to throw off her outdoor wraps, and pretend she had all the time in the world. If she didn't, if they once suspected she was all alone, one or the other would be out of bed in a jiffy. And then

what? A relapse probably, just as they seemed a wee bit better.

That afternoon Berry got up for a few minutes and sat wrapped in a blanket while Phyllis made his bed afresh. But he was glad to tumble back, and immediately dropped off to sleep without, she was thankful to say, bothering her any more about Joe Perkins. The fibs she had had to tell about that little man! That he was in too much of a hurry to come upstairs, that he'd surely talk to Berry this evening, et cetera, et cetera. The last was that she believed he was afraid of catching something.

"Phyllis!" Kent's feeble voice halted her on the stairhead and she turned back. Wouldn't she stay a little while, he asked. Of course she would. Bringing a chair, she sat by him, not sorry to rest. It was very quiet. He did not try to talk much, but seemed satisfied just to have her there. Once, as she smoothed his sheet, he took her hand, held it a minute, and murmured, "So small." Then, "Poor child, we've spoiled your Christmas."

"Don't think of that," she told him earnestly. "Just get well." Then, putting on her managing air, "I think you'd better try to take a nap."

"Just as you say, nurse." He glanced up at her with the ghost of his old amused smile, and obediently turned over on his side. "You've done me good, you know," he added behind closed eyes.

Phyllis went downstairs more at peace than she had been since that afternoon—could it be only two days ago?

—when Kent had come stumbling into the house and collapsed on the sofa. He was on the mend now, he and Berry both, that was sure. What a fright they had given her. She felt rested and strong. "Joe can come or not as he likes." She smiled to herself. "I can get along all right. My hands may be small"—they were rough and chapped as she looked at them—"and I'm not very big myself, or very old, but I *am* managing. They can't call me a tenderfoot any longer," she triumphed.

She wished, as she trimmed and lighted the stable lantern and prepared to tackle the evening chores, that Ronald Taylor could see her now. Wouldn't he be horrified just! She could imagine his expression. "Hummingbird," she quoted derisively. "Well, watch the hummingbird rush down and milk while they're both asleep upstairs!"

The day after Christmas brought a sudden change of weather. The chinook wind blew and under its influence the snow shrank and melted. Phyllis, coming up from giving the horses their midday feed, was surprised to find her feet wet. She set down the pail of water, and stretched out her arms to the welcome warmth. The shining of the sun on the snow was fairly dazzling. When the silvery jingle of sleigh bells made itself heard, at first it all seemed part and parcel of the brilliance of the day. Then the jingle grew louder, was near at hand.

"My soul," she exclaimed, "someone's coming. Who on earth can it be?" It seemed years and years since she

had seen any human being besides the two sick men.

Dr. Tilton was reining in his big horse, and beside him in the cutter was a girl who waved and began to throw off the robes.

"Mary!" cried Phyllis rushing toward her and giving her an ecstatic hug. "How glad I am to see you! I knew something good must happen on such a lovely day. And Dr. Tilton"—turning to shake hands with him—"it is good of you to come so far, and just after Christmas Day, too. Now everything will be all right." Phyllis gave a great sigh of relief. "But they really are better this morning. Who told you, though? I can't see—"

"Nobody told me anything. I'm on my way to see old Mrs. Reilly in the valley and thought I'd look in on you. Is someone sick here?"

"Is someone sick? I should just think so. Berry and Kent both. They're in bed upstairs. I don't know what's the matter, but they have been awfully ill. Day before yesterday I was scared stiff." She took the reins from the doctor's hands. "Let me look after the horse, please do, while you go right up to them."

"I have to get on soon," returned the doctor, "so I'll just tie up here and put the blanket on him. Now, come inside and tell me all about it. How long have they been laid up?"

A few minutes later Dr. Tilton came downstairs, smiling. "Well, they seem to be pretty well out of the woods. I hear you make a fine nurse, young lady."

"I don't think so," returned Phyllis honestly. "I'm too ignorant. I didn't have the slightest idea what I ought to do."

"Daddy," Mary broke in. "What do you think this girl has been doing? All the farm work—milking, feeding the stock, cleaning out the stable, carrying the water, and all sorts of things, and all the time pretending that Joe Perkins was here taking care of it. Isn't she sporting?" Mary had her arm round Phyllis's waist, and was regarding her proudly.

"That true, Phyllis?"

"There wasn't anything else to do. I was afraid they'd get up if they knew."

"That's my prairie girl," cried the doctor clapping her on the shoulder. "I knew you had it in you."

Phyllis hurried some lunch together, all her weariness forgotten. She popped some of the neglected mince pies into the oven, scrambled eggs, made tea, and sat down with her friends to the first real meal she had enjoyed for three days.

During lunch the doctor observed her rather closely. He noticed the girl's pale lips and that she started and became tense at any sound from upstairs. So when he had finished giving her instructions about the further care of her patients, he added jokingly, "It won't do to let the superintendent of the hospital fall sick, and she will if she doesn't take a little care of herself. I prescribe one hour's rest in the middle of the morning and the same in the

middle of the afternoon—flat on your back, if you please —and proper meals."

"But, Doctor—" began Phyllis.

"Yes, I know, but we're going to change all that. I'll drive round to Perkins's place and send him over. And how would you like to keep Mary overnight, and I'll call for her on my way back tomorrow? Do you think you can chaperon her for twenty-four hours?" the doctor added with a twinkle.

At this, the girls made such a joyful noise that someone knocked on the floor overhead.

"That's Berry. He wants to know what's up?"

Mary was suddenly quiet. "Do you think . . . do you think I might go up and see him?"

"It would do him good, please go." Phyllis fairly pushed the hesitating girl up the stairs.

"I believe it was the chinook that changed everything," declared Phyllis that afternoon from her back on the sofa, where she was carrying out the doctor's instructions. "See how things improved right away when it thawed. They" —she gestured toward the ceiling—"began this morning really to pick up. Then you and your father came. Then Joe appeared."

Joe had been over, had seen Berry at last, and had let out the fact that it was his first visit.

"It's a thoroughgoing chinook," Mary replied, her eyes on the window. "Look at it dripping off the roof. There'll be some wonderful icicles in the morning."

"I feel sort of thawed out myself. Let's just stay here and let the lunch dishes go until after supper, shall we?"

Berry was so much better that he came down in his dressing gown to afternoon tea, and Phyllis, leaving Mary to look after him, carried her own cup upstairs to sit with Kent. She found him propped up in bed and looking decidedly more like himself.

"The wonder girl!" he exclaimed as soon as she came into the room. "Sit here, and let me tell you what I think of you." He took the cup from her hand, laid it on the bedside table, and made a place for her on the edge of the bed. "Now I want to say this: if I ever thought you weren't fitted for this kind of life, you've proved me dead wrong. I take it all back. You've won your spurs." He paused and gave her one of his old-time grins, then went on slowly, "As for what you have done for *me,* well, I shan't ever forget it."

Phyllis's eyes filled with tears. It was, as she had said to Mary, as if something frosty inside her had broken up. "I don't know why I should cry," she murmured through the tears that would make their way down her cheeks. "I think it's because I'm so glad you're getting better. You did look so pale. I was dreadfully frightened."

"You poor girl! You're worn out." He pulled her toward him and picking up a folded handkerchief, wiped her eyes. "There, that's the second time," he smiled. "Remember the day the Indian took your good loaves of bread?" She nodded, still apologetic. "I think you'll have

to make me official eye wiper," he went on with a comical quirk to his eyebrows.

"You're very good at it," she replied, a smile breaking through the tears. "You do know how to make a person feel better. And somehow," she added after a pause during which she twisted her handkerchief, "if you do tease me, I don't mind. It sort of braces me up."

"Then, that's settled. When you are in trouble, you come to me. And I—I'll do what a poor blundering male can. Shake hands on it."

They shook hands, half laughing, half feeling a compact had really been made. Kent's eyes followed the girl until she disappeared below the stairhead. Then he sighed contentedly and lay back on his pillows.

CHAPTER XVII

A Ball at the Mounted Police Barracks

Every now and then through the long months of January and February, Phyllis took the white silk dress lovingly out of its tissue wrappings and wondered whether she would ever have a chance to wear it. Then early in March Joe appeared with a bundle of mail. Among the letters was one for each of them from "The Officers and Men of Troop X" requesting the pleasure of their company at a dance to be given March thirteenth at the Regina Mounted Police Barracks.

Phyllis clapped her hands. "At last!" she cried. "I thought it was never going to happen. And look," she went on, running through her other mail, "here's a note from Mrs. Tilton saying we are all to have dinner with them and start from their house. Oh, and after the dance I'm to sleep with Mary, and you men are going to Mrs. Thomson's for the night. What fun!" Then a dismaying thought struck her. "But what about the milking? Can we go—can we all go?" She looked anxiously from Kent to Berry and from Berry back to Kent.

"Sure you'll all go," put in Joe. "The old man will look after things."

"But, Joe, aren't you going yourself?"

"Who? Me? Who'd dance with a little sawed-off runt like me?"

"I would," replied Phyllis earnestly.

"Bless you, miss, I'm sure you would. But I ain't going among all them tail coats and red tunics."

So it was settled, and the evening of the great day found Phyllis standing before the mirror in Mary Tilton's bedroom and craning her neck to get a back view of the white silk dress, which Mary was lacing up the back.

"Keep still, you little idiot," scolded Mary from behind. "How do you expect me to get this straight if you keep jiggling about like a ballet dancer?" Phyllis obeyed, but for a few moments only. Then her restless hands stole out from her sides to lift from its wrappings a corsage of pink rosebuds, which she tried first in one place and then in another on the bodice of her gown.

"There you are, Miss Conceit," said Mary, giving her an affectionate little push as she tied the silk lace securely. "Now put those flowers down and do me up, or we shan't be ready in time."

Phyllis gave a happy little sigh as she turned round. "Oh, Mary," she cried, "you look so sweet in that Nile green." Then throwing her arms impulsively round her friend, she exclaimed, "I do love you."

Mary returned the hug. Her charming smile showed she returned the affection, but all she said was, "Come along, infant. Don't get so excited."

"It's all very well for you," replied Phyllis as she pulled the lace through the eyelet holes. "You've been to dances at the barracks before, but remember this is my very first ball anywhere. So can you wonder? . . ." Secretly she was thinking, And I shall see Ronald again after all these weeks—that's something exciting in itself.

With the coming of the severe winter months the valley patrol had been called in, and Constable Taylor was once more grumblingly attached to Depot. As for Phyllis, she had not been to town for nearly two months, but she had not been quite out of touch with her Mounted Police admirer. She had had letters—audacious letters, taking too much for granted, she told herself, but letters that never failed to thrill her. They were always brimming with high spirits, but in the midst of narrating some absurd adventure, he would break off to insist that he loved her. And now, if a tingle of excitement ran all through her from top to toe, it was as much the anticipation of seeing him again as of dancing at her first ball.

The rosebuds for her dress were his. And wasn't that just like him, she thought, as she bent her head to sniff their sweetness, always full of lovely ideas. He must have sent all the way to Winnipeg—think of it, nearly four hundred miles—for flowers like these. She waltzed round the room smoothing the long kid gloves on her arms.

Mary pretended to laugh, but was really almost as excited herself. A Mounted Police ball was a good deal of an event to Mary, too—and for Berry to be there and to have

already made her promise him the first dance and all the waltzes! It was marvelous!

The band was beginning to tune up when their party entered the ballroom. The place was gay with flags and bunting. Crossed lances decorated the walls. Scarlet tunics, with and without gold lace, and black "tails" were moving about, busily engaging partners. Phyllis, looking eagerly round, was surprised at the number of people in evening dress; she had not supposed there were so many in Regina. True, there was also a scattering of tradespeople from town who had been content with their Sunday suits, and here and there a farmer in his tweeds. Not *her* farmers, however; they were resplendent in the correct black and white.

Unmarried girls were few, and she and Mary quickly found themselves surrounded. Inspector Chambers, who had escorted Phyllis and Berry to the musical ride, begged a dance and presented a fellow officer, an arrogant blond, who promptly took the program from her hand, wrote his name in two places, and was about to return it, when—

"Excuse me," said a well-known voice close to Phyllis, "Miss Vernon has already promised me the first waltz." And Constable Taylor calmly erased the inspector's name and substituted his own. The officer gave him a furious look, plainly meant to put a private in his place, and turned haughty inquiring eyes to Phyllis.

"I'm afraid that one was taken," she murmured apologetically. "How about number ten?" She took Ronald's

proffered arm and allowed him to lead her off for the Grand March. Inspector Beeton glared at the retreating figures, but he could only swear under his breath and promise himself to make it hot for that insolent young cub.

"You cheeky boy," laughed Phyllis as they took their places in the line, "you know very well that wasn't your dance."

"Well, it is now," he replied easily. "I've been counting on that waltz for weeks. Besides," he went on grinning, "it was a nice little chance to get back at that fellow. He had me up in orderly room the other day just because I was a few seconds late on parade. But let's forget him," he begged, letting mischievous eyes rest on her. "He's nothing but a pest anyway. Let's talk about ourselves. Why didn't you write to me?"

At this moment the commissioner entered, accompanied by the adjutant, and immediately the band struck up the opening march. The line began to move. Phyllis, looking up and down the ranks for her friends, spied Mr. and Mrs. Thomson, Mary with Berry, and then, to her surprise, Flora MacDonald side by side with Kent. She had not noticed the MacDonalds arrive. They must have just come, for there was Mr. MacDonald, Aunt Christie on his arm, edging in between two of the marching couples. Had Kent been waiting for Flora? She shrugged off the thought. After all, why shouldn't he? She was so preoccupied with this idea that for a moment she did not hear Ronald's question.

"Why didn't you write to me?" he repeated. "I looked and looked for a letter. Do you think that was kind?"

Phyllis pulled her attention back. "Oh, didn't I write?" she replied airily. "I suppose then there was nothing to say."

He looked at her reproachfully. "You might have said, 'Dear Ronald,' or 'Dearest Ronald, I've been trying very hard, and think I am succeeding.' I'd have been satisfied with a short letter like that."

She colored and dropped her eyes to the flowers on her shoulder. "You were sweet to send me these roses. I just love them."

"Lucky roses!"

The pink deepened to crimson in the girl's face. Why had she used that word? Her partner looked at her with frankly admiring eyes, from the bronze slippers peeping below the white gown to the shiny hair piled above her little head. "My word, but you look lovely tonight—something to remember 'when I am far away.' "

"Far away?" she queried.

The music melted into a waltz and the room was filled with circling couples. "Don't let us waste time," he answered, drawing her into the dance.

Partners were as thick as blackberries. She could have filled her program twice over. Alec MacDonald was on it and all the men she had met at Mrs. Thomson's little dance, besides several officers and two or three enlisted men who asked for an introduction.

"Having a good time?" asked Berry once as he whirled by in the waltz.

"Glorious," she called back. Indeed, the only disappointment was that Kent had not asked her for a dance. But presently he came and diffidently explained that he knew she would be besieged, but might he have one of the supper extras?

She danced a lancers with Sergeant Stewart, and for the first time heard a square dance called off, including the facetious, "Herd to the center," and at the end, "Stampede all!"

Then it was suppertime and Ronald appeared like magic, hurrying her into the adjoining room where the refreshments were being served. He took her straight to a small table for two, almost hidden from the rest of the room by a stand of arms. Then he fetched cold chicken, sandwiches, and coffee for them both. He was very brisk about it all, as though he were in a hurry to clear away preliminaries.

"You seem to be bursting with something," remarked Phyllis, who recognized the signs. "You may as well come out with it."

"Eat some supper first," he ordered, and resolutely took up his own knife and fork.

Phyllis wondered what he meant, but she was hungry and quite willing to postpone surprises until her appetite was satisfied. It was Taylor who after all couldn't wait. He

laid down his sandwich half eaten and looked at her triumphantly.

"We're marching at daybreak," he announced, his face all one grin, and before she could open her mouth to inquire where to, added, "Indian trouble up north. Isn't it splendid?"

Phyllis leaned back in her chair and regarded him with wide-open eyes.

"You're marching all that way in this kind of weather—when it's still winter?"

"Yes, a real adventure. A chance to do something at last." He looked over his shoulder and leaned forward, adding, "The Old Man didn't want us to come to this dance—not those of us who are booked to go—but he gave in. If he hadn't, you and I wouldn't be sitting here together. Gosh, I should have been furious."

"Have you known long?" Phyllis faltered—she was still feeling startled.

"Been expecting marching orders any time this past week. Word came from Ottawa just after dark today—too late to start fortunately."

"Shall you be away long?"

"Haven't any idea. They don't tell us much, you know."

They sat on talking, regardless of the passage of time. Ronald was full of enthusiasm. It would be his first experience of the sort and he was keen for it. Kent came into the almost empty room, saw them together, and went out

again unobserved. The extras were over, the band, refreshed with supper, had gone back to the regular program, but neither of the two noticed it. Ronald had stopped talking about the Indians and was showing Phyllis some pictures just received from England.

"How you must love your home," she exclaimed, delighted with the beautiful old house set among lawns and trees.

"Well, it's home," he replied, his eyes on the picture, and added, "I do want you to see it."

"I'd love to sometime. Is this your family? Your mother does look sweet, so does your little sister, with the puppy in her arms."

"And what about Dad?" he inquired.

"Sir Mervyn? He's very handsome, but I think I'd be a little afraid of him."

"The old boy isn't so stiff as he looks," replied Ronald irreverently. "Here's another of the family, taken about ten years ago, when Margery was a baby. I'm in that one."

"So you are, and looking as impudent as usual." In spite of her light words the boy's face fascinated her. The eyes, dark and fine as now, seemed to look straight back at her. "I want to keep this one," she said. "May I have it?"

"Of course."

He hesitated and seemed to want to say something more. Suddenly he blurted out, "I say, Phyllis, I didn't mean to say anything, but perhaps soon you'll get a surprise. I—I do hope you'll be pleased."

"What sort of a surprise?" she began, but at that moment the band struck up "God Save the Queen," the signal that the ball was over.

Ronald sprang to his feet and stood at attention. As soon as the last note died away, he turned to Phyllis. "Before we go, I want the kiss you wouldn't give me that night." Without more ado he took her in his arms and kissed her on both cheeks, on her hair, and finally very gently on the lips.

Phyllis, taken by surprise, made no resistance. When he released her, they stood for a moment face to face, hands joined. "Don't be too brave, Ronald," she faltered. "Come back safe."

It was not until they were driving back to town that she remembered the broken engagement with Kent for a supper dance. She had been so absorbed in what Ronald was telling her, that it had gone clean out of her mind. Now she felt penitent and embarrassed.

"I forgot our dance," she murmured apologetically, turning to him on the cutter seat. "Please excuse me, I'm ever so sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Don't mention it," he returned rather shortly. "I saw you were occupied. It's of no consequence."

And being still wrapped in the good-by to Ronald, she did not notice the shortness, and said good night to him and Berry at the Tildens' door, without any thought of his caring one way or the other.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Mounted Police March at Daybreak

There was no going to sleep for either Mary or Phyllis that night. Too many exciting things had to be talked over. Long after the house was quiet, the two girls, snuggled together in bed, were still exchanging confidences in whispers.

"Did you ever see anything so dramatic as the way they all marched out as soon as 'God Save the Queen' was played?" asked Mary for the tenth time.

"Never in my whole life. Do you know what it made me think of? *Vanity Fair* and the ball on the eve of Waterloo."

Phyllis lay on her back in the darkness and stared at the ceiling. She thought of Amelia Sedley, stricken, holding George's red sash to her heart when he marched to battle. Ronald is marching away from me, she thought, but I'm not in despair like poor Amelia. She must have been dreadfully in love.

Mary interrupted her thoughts to ask, "Did you know anything about it beforehand?"

"Only at supper. Ronald told me then. He was fairly bursting with it. And *pleased.*"

"What were you talking about all that time in the supper room? I saw you coming out long after everyone else."

"He was showing me pictures of their place in Warwickshire. It's a lovely house, Mary, and his mother looks sweet. He adores his mother." Phyllis was longing to confide in Mary, yet could not bring herself to do so. She was still thrilling with that good-by kiss, but it was too, too private to talk about. And as for telling about the proposal, that wouldn't be fair. Not until she had made up her mind what the answer was going to be. But it was hard to keep it all in.

"Do you think he really cares for you?" came Mary's whisper in her ear.

A sound like a pistol shot overhead saved Phyllis from answering. The girls clung together giggling. "How it does make you jump when a nail bangs off like that in the night."

Suddenly Mary sat up in bed. "Phyllis," she exclaimed, "I have a wonderful idea. Why shouldn't we go and see them start? Are you game?"

"Am I game!" She bounced up in bed beside Mary. "Of course I am. How shall we go? Walk?"

"We could take old Ned. When did you say they were leaving?"

"At daybreak, Ronald said."

Mary struck a match. "Phyllis Vernon, do you know

what time it is? Five o'clock! We've been talking all night. Why, it must be daybreak by six."

Hurry. Hurry. They dressed stealthily, putting on overshoes, fur caps, coats, mufflers, and heavy mitts, and stole downstairs. Lighting the lantern that hung beside the kitchen door, they tiptoed through the snow to the barn. It was very cold and the barn door creaked as it slid back, scaring them for fear someone might have heard, so that for a minute they kept quite still, holding their breath.

"They wouldn't really mind," whispered Mary, meaning her parents, "but if they knew beforehand, of course they would be obliged to make a fuss about our losing our sleep."

"Oh, sleep!" returned Phyllis with scorn in her voice for such a weakness.

The girls had already got the harness onto old Ned and were leading him out of the stable when a footstep close at hand startled them.

"My goodness, what's that?" whispered Phyllis and pulled the horse to a halt.

"I know what you're up to," said a sleepy voice, and Peter stepped into the ring of lantern light. "I heard what you said upstairs. You're going to the barracks to see the Police start somewhere. I'm coming, too."

The girls looked at one another in dismay. Here was a complication. "See here, Peter," began his sister, "you must go back to bed. It's much too early for—"

"Your grandmother!" returned Peter impolitely. "If you can go, why can't I? I'll make a row and wake Dad," he threatened as Mary hesitated.

"Oh, let him come," urged Phyllis. "He's awake anyhow. Here, fasten up your coat and buckle your overshoes, and for goodness' sake, hurry."

At last Peter was wrapped against the cold, the barn door closed—but not without a terrific squeak—the lantern extinguished, and the fur robe pulled over the three of them as they crowded into the cutter seat. Old Ned rose from a reverie at a flick from the whip and they were off. Phyllis glanced uneasily at the sky. The stars were fading. In the northeast the light was growing stronger every minute. Is this "daybreak," she wondered. It would be maddening if after getting up in the middle of the night and sneaking off, they were to be too late.

"Come on, Ned!" she said impatiently.

"He can't go much faster or else he wheezes." This from Peter.

After that nobody spoke. They seemed to be using all their will power to push the sleigh forward. Even Peter was silent. How eerie it was to be driving at this time of night—or morning—not a sound to be heard in all the world except the plop-plop of the horse's feet and the squeaking of the runners on the hard frozen snow. Even the prairie wind was still.

They were halted by a sentry at the bridge. "Who goes there?" he cried.

"Friend," said Mary, who knew the correct reply.

"Advance friend and give the countersign."

Fortunately Mary knew the password, and gave it. The sentry stood aside with a silent grin.

They found the barrack square very much alive—men, horses, and wagons pouring in and forming into line. Peter was out of the sleigh and had Ned tied to a post while the girls were still disentangling their feet from the buffalo robe. On the sidewalk in front of the officers' quarters, wives and daughters, bundled up against the cold, had come out to see their menfolk off. Mary and Phyllis, feeling rather out of place now they were there, walked over to join the little group.

It was still half dark. More and more bobsleds were pulling into the square, the wagon boxes piled high with provisions for men or provender for horses. Before them and between them came men on horseback. An officer was riding up and down barking out orders. Even in the dim light, and muffled up as he was in a fur coat, Phyllis recognized him as one of her partners of the night before. Through everything was the shaking of sleigh bells and the jingle of bits as horses fidgeted and pawed the snow.

Phyllis's eyes searched the crowd for Ronald, but in vain. Could it be that he was not going with them after all? Or was he at the far end of the line where the semi-darkness hid him? Then suddenly she saw him. His horse, impatient of the curb, reared and swung round, bringing his profile into view. He was quite near her after all. If

only he would look her way! But he didn't, he didn't. Now he had turned his back again. She wanted to run out and speak to him, but evidently it wouldn't be the thing to do. None of the other women had stirred from their places.

He's going without seeing me, thought Phyllis. She was bitterly disappointed. Her heart went down, down, down, and when Mary exclaimed, "Don't they look splendid!" and "See, there's your friend," she had to gulp before she could answer.

Then Peter, who had been skylarking with some of his boy friends, ran up, and Phyllis had a sudden idea. She took the boy aside, and pointed Taylor out. "Peter," she whispered, "will you go up to him and say, 'Phyllis says good luck.' Just that. Do it quietly."

"Righto," answered Peter, dashing off. Phyllis saw him give the message and point in her direction, and saw Taylor turn sharply round in the saddle. But at that moment a word of command rang out. The team horses threw themselves into their collars, the riders trotted ahead, and the column began to move out of the square. It was too late. Taylor had just time to salute before he must move on with them. But she had seen his face light up. At least he knew that she had come to see him off. There was a clattering of hoofs as horse after horse passed over the wooden bridge that spanned the creek, and then they were lost to sight, gone on their three-hundred-mile journey across the frozen snow. Gone, leaving Phyllis with a queer empty feeling.

CHAPTER XIX

The Most Surprised Girl in All Canada

Life on the farm seemed sadly humdrum after the excitement of the ball. Day after day brought the usual routine —milk to care for, lamps, sweeping, beds, and dishes, dishes, dishes. Phyllis wished to goodness something would happen to break the monotony.

She spent a good deal of time thinking of the Police expedition and trying to imagine what a winter march would be like. How could those poor men possibly keep warm in tents? Or the horses? They, poor things, didn't even have tents, she supposed. When the wind howled at night, she pitied Ronald sleeping on the ground, while she was warm and snug in bed. But, after all, she reminded herself, he was probably enjoying it and thinking it all a grand adventure.

She waited in vain for the surprise he had spoken of at the dance. Meanwhile the snows melted and very gradually the mud dried up. There was an interval between runners and wheels when driving was impossible, but twice a week Berry pushed through on Turvey for the mail. On one of these occasions he returned bringing her a big square envelope. Phyllis carried it to her room, ex-

pecting it to be from Ronald. Then she noticed that the stamp was English, and at the back was a crest with which she was unfamiliar. The handwriting was strange too. Whom could it be from? Well, better find out. . . .

"Dear Miss Vernon," it began. Um'm, no one she knew well or it would be "Dear Phyllis." She turned to the signature. "Alice Taylor." That meant nothing. The letter went on:

You will perhaps be surprised to hear from a stranger, but our son has spoken of you so often that we do not feel altogether strange. He is grateful for the very kind hospitality shown him by your brother and yourself, and so are his father and I, especially as his present associates are not such as he has been accustomed to.

Phyllis read with growing wonder. She turned back to the signature. "Alice Taylor." Taylor! Ronald's mother, of course. But good gracious!

It would give us great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Would it be possible for you to spend a few weeks with us here at our country home? There are young people in the neighborhood; we have horses, a good tennis court and, unless it proves to be a dry season, canoeing on the brook is possible. So that you would find ways of amusing yourself. We thought, besides, you might like to see Ronald's home.

Phyllis put down the letter and looked about her in astonishment. Of all unexpected things! What can Ronald have said to them, she wondered. So this was the surprise! He knew it was coming; he had asked his mother to send

this invitation. What was it he had said—that he "hoped she would be pleased." Was she pleased? Honestly, she didn't know. So far, she was just plain stunned. "Perhaps I'd better read the rest of the letter," she reminded herself, and picked it up gingerly as though it might spring some further surprises on her.

If your brother can spare you at that time, June is a lovely month here and would suit us very well.

We hope you will consent to come, and if so, Sir Mervyn will send your brother a check for expenses, as we should not think of imposing on you for our pleasure.

Very sincerely yours,
Alice Taylor

"A lovely letter!" exclaimed Phyllis as she read the last word. "It makes me want to 'consent.' I wonder. . . ." She sat dreaming with the letter in her lap. The pictures Ronald had shown her were vivid in her mind, and in imagination she saw herself on those gracious lawns, playing with the dogs, having tea with Sir Mervyn and Lady Taylor under the big oak, meeting other girls—girls who had no dishes to wash, no chickens to feed, no meals to cook in a kitchen that sometimes was freezing cold and sometimes broiling hot.

She looked down at the letter. The words, "We thought you might like to see Ronald's home," jumped out at her. That was the whole thing, *of course*. Why hadn't she seen it before? Lady Taylor hadn't said so outright, but it was

plain as day that they thought of her as perhaps going to be Ronald's wife. They wanted to see what she was like—if she would "do."

She started to her feet, indignation hot within her, but the thought of Ronald brought her up short. It was he who had begged this invitation, who "hoped she would be pleased." He really and truly did want her to see his home. And perhaps after all—she was relenting—it was natural that his parents would like to see her before. . . . She stopped there. Before what? That was the great question. This letter would have to be answered; it was one more thing pressing her to make a decision. And she didn't want to make any decision. "I'll give myself a week to think," she said irresolutely, "and I won't say a word to anyone."

The week went by and still Phyllis could not make up her mind how to reply to Lady Taylor's letter. Indeed, she was more confused than ever. She tried and tried to look soberly at what it all meant, but her feelings carried her first this way, then that. There were days when the very idea of leaving Berry and the farm and going back to live in England seemed ridiculous. For there was no question but that going for a month might lead to living there in the end. It was generally when she was tired or depressed that she swung in favor of accepting the invitation, with all it implied. Especially in the dusk of the evening when the great emptiness and loneliness of the prairie weighed on her spirits.

Twice she all but showed Berry the fateful letter and

told him she wanted to accept the invitation. But each time some instinct held her back. It wasn't, after all, Ronald's home that mattered; it was Ronald himself. Was she in love with him, or wasn't she? She couldn't rid herself of a conviction that if she married him, they might be gloriously happy for a year or two, but it wouldn't last. It was no use trying to argue herself out of the idea, for there it was, and it would not down.

Then something else happened, as though she hadn't enough to worry her. One evening she and Kent were alone together, Berry having ridden over to see Joe. Kent was deep in a magazine and seemed to have forgotten her existence. Every now and then she paused in her darning to watch his absorbed face, and wonder whether she could possibly have the courage to ask his advice.

Before she could make up her mind, he laid his magazine aside, reached for a match, and remarked, "I suppose Berry has told you all about our plans for this year."

Well, it was too late now. She followed his lead. "About plowing up the new field, do you mean?"

"No, that's all done. Then you haven't heard that we're proposing to go into horse raising?"

Phyllis opened her eyes wide. Horse raising! Here was news indeed. "Why, no, Berry hasn't said a word."

Kent looked surprised. "I was sure he'd talked the whole thing over with you."

"You know how forgetful Berry is"—she excused him. "He probably thinks he has. But do tell me. Is he—are you

—do you mean you're going to give up growing wheat?" This was such an overwhelming idea that she waited open-mouthed for the reply.

Kent shook his head very decidedly. "Not at all. We'll go on with the farm the same as usual, and take up land in the valley for the ranch—run the two places in partnership. What do you think of the idea?"

"Well, I'm sort of overcome. But it sounds grand, and quite sensible, too—not putting all your eggs in one basket."

Kent dropped down astride a chair and leaned his arms on the back. He smiled at her. "You seem to get the idea. Besides, there's bound to be a demand for horses as the country opens up—work horses especially. You know how it is now, anything heavier than a broncho has to come from the East."

"Yes," she answered, "I know." She was gratified to be consulted like this—to be taken out of the kitchen, as it were, and invited into partnership. And horses! She loved them as she was sure she could never love wheat. A pleased smile played over her face. Then a thought struck her, and the smile died away. "But would it mean that one of you would have to live in the valley?"

"Naturally. And of course it would be me. Berry likes the prairie and I know more about horses." He was regarding her steadily. "So you see, I really meant something when I asked if you could put up with me until spring."

"Don't remind me of that!" she exclaimed, coloring, and bent her head over her darning. This news was so sudden she did not know what to say. Kent going to leave them! Kent away and just she and Berry in the house. That was what she used to want. But not now. Why, it would seem dreadfully empty. She was surprised at her dismay and, to hide it, she objected, "But how would you live?"

"I suppose I can still shake a frying pan." He grinned and added, "Not but what I'm a bit spoiled, thanks to you. You make a man too comfortable."

"It seems a shame to break up," she exclaimed, and then felt guilty, for wouldn't she herself be breaking things up if she went to England.

For a while neither of them spoke. Phyllis kept her eyes on her mending, but she was very conscious that Kent was looking at her. Then he broke the silence.

"What's the news from Taylor?" he asked abruptly.

She was startled by the unexpected question. What made him think of Ronald now? Had he read her thoughts? "Why . . . why . . ." she stammered. But before she could frame an answer a hulloo was heard outside and Berry threw the door open.

There could be no more talk just then, and Phyllis was glad of it. She felt terribly confused. If she had been worried by her indecision over Lady Taylor's invitation, she was still more worried by the prospect of Kent's leaving the Pile o' Bones Farm. And what had made him ask her

about Ronald just then? Did he suspect? That night she could not sleep; she tossed and turned, and dawn found her still awake.

Tired of the bed, she pushed her feet into slippers, and sliding the screen aside, leaned out of the window. The sun was not up, but a lovely clear light lay over the silent prairie, and the morning star shone palely near the horizon. The sight soothed and calmed her.

"Now I can go to sleep," she said, "and tomorrow I will decide."

CHAPTER XX

Canada Forever!

One morning, a week after her interrupted conversation with Kent, Phyllis was on her hands and knees in the garden industriously weeding the young carrots. As she worked, her thoughts were busy.

"It's a year ago today that I landed in Montreal," she said to herself, "and, my goodness, what a lot has happened in that time. Why, I was just a child then—didn't know anything." She felt immensely older now and more experienced.

"Yes, I've changed—and the place has changed, too," she added with a satisfied glance around her. The little house, with its curtains at the windows, its veranda shaded by wild cucumber vines, its flower garden in front cut off from the prairie by a rustic fence of poplar saplings, certainly looked very different from the forlorn, unfinished building of a year ago.

Pip, the pet crow, watched her from the fence top, drooping his wings and making companionable noises. A little farther off, Caesar, the big red rooster, put up his head and crowed. Phyllis sat back on her heels to rest. The sun shone warm and delicious on her back, a crystal breeze

played in her hair. Suddenly she felt herself part and parcel of the country.

"Why I love it here!" she exclaimed out loud, looking round at the featureless landscape over which the radiant blue sky hung like a canopy. "Whatever made me think I should like to go back to England?" She was surprised to hear herself say this, but she knew without a doubt that it was true.

For a moment the picture of Ronald's home floated across her consciousness, but it had lost its power to charm. Poor Ronald! He had so set his heart on taking her there. She hated to disappoint him. But it isn't fair, she thought with a sigh, to let him go on thinking that some day I might. . . . I'll have to write him that his hummingbird has grown into—what? A staid old hen? She giggled to herself at the comparison.

A sound behind her made her jump. She turned quickly, and there, just as though her thoughts had conjured him up, stood Taylor himself, all agrin.

"Ronald!" she gasped, hardly able to believe her eyes. She had supposed him hundreds of miles away.

"Did I startle you, darling? What a shame!" But he did not look ashamed.

"But what in the world— How did you get here?"

"Dispatch rider," he triumphed. "Got in last night and have a day or two's rest before going back."

"And is a twelve-mile ride each way your idea of a rest?"

"Yes"—he was beaming down on her—"when there is

someone very special at the end of it. Are you all right, darling?" He tipped her face up. "You look it, except that your dear little nose is peeling!" He stooped to kiss her, but she drew back shyly.

"Of course I'm all right. But I want to hear what *you* have been doing all this time. Was it as exciting as you thought?"

He shrugged. "There's not much to tell. The uprising didn't amount to much, after all. We had a few brushes with the Indians—nothing to speak of." But he had his flashing smile as he added, "Just the same, I think maybe I'm due for a promotion when we're back home."

They were strolling toward the house, and a silence seemed to have fallen between them. Ronald broke it. "Listen, Phyllis," he said, "did you get a letter from the mater?"

Her heart sank. Now for it! She would have to tell him. But how hard it was when he was looking so pleased, evidently sure that everything was going just as he wanted it to. Summoning her courage, she got out, "Yes, I did, Ronald, a lovely letter, asking me to visit them. It came nearly a month ago, but I only answered it yesterday."

He looked at her eagerly and Phyllis felt a horrid qualm.

"You see, at first I couldn't make up my mind what to say to your mother, and then—well, it took me some time because I hated so to disappoint you."

Ronald's face fell. "Then aren't you going, Phyllis?"

She shook her head. "I belong here, Ronald. I see it quite plainly now. I'm going to stay on the farm."

"Do you mean . . . you don't mean? . . ."

"Yes, I'm afraid I do. I mean everything. Oh, Ronald," she went on pleadingly, "I did 'try' like you said, honestly I did, but I always thought trying to love anyone wasn't much good. And now I know."

He looked dreadfully dashed. "Is there someone else?" he asked after a pause.

She nodded, her eyes down. "Yes—I mean, no. I don't know."

"But," stammered Ronald, "but. . . ." Tears were in his eyes. "I don't believe he cares for you half as much as I do, the big stiff!" He kicked savagely at an innocent wild rose.

Phyllis nearly laughed; he looked so much like a naughty boy. But her heart was sore for him. "I'm so awfully sorry, Ronald, dear Ronald," she faltered. "Is it my fault?"

His frown melted. "Of course not, darling. There isn't any fault about it. But I did hope. . . ." He heaved a sigh. "Ah, if you'd only said the other thing, Phyllis, wouldn't I have been the proudest chap in all Canada!"

"We can be friends just the same, can't we?" she pleaded.

The boy whistled the bugle call for mess: "Officers' wives have puddings and pies, but soldiers' wives have skilly!" He looked down on her with a grin that was half sad and half comical. "Well, if some other fellow is going to have the puddings and pies, skilly it is for me. Yes, we'll be friends." They shook hands on it, solemnly, lingeringly.

"But you must stay and have dinner," she exclaimed, as they reached the hitching rail and he began at once to tighten the horse's girth.

He shook his head. "We'd better be getting back, Thomas and I. He can make it all right. He's a veteran now, aren't you, old thing?" He stroked the chestnut's velvet muzzle. Without offering again to kiss her, he soberly mounted and touched his horse with the spur.

Phyllis turned sadly back into the house, wishing with all her heart she need not have disappointed him, when a clattering of hoofs brought her sharply round. There he was again! His face had lost its gravity, and was alight with some new happy thought.

"Phyllis," he cried, jumping off his horse and running to her, "Phyllis darling, I want to beg a very great favor."

"Anything, anything I can," she eagerly assured him.

"Don't laugh at me," he begged, his eyes earnestly on hers. "This is the favor. . . ." He paused, then blurted out, "Will you let me be godfather to your first child?"

"Ronald, how can you!" she exclaimed, the color dyeing her cheeks. Then, seeing that he really and quite innocently meant it, she swallowed her embarrassment and added hastily, "Of course you shall—it's a promise."

They shook hands once more, and he rode off, but this time his face had its usual buoyant expression.

Phyllis followed him with her eyes until he was out of sight. Then she sank down on an upturned pail, and laughed and laughed and laughed.

CHAPTER XXI

"Phyllis Is My Only Joy"

The wheat swirled and swayed as the prairie wind rushed through it. The dancing heads gave before its onslaught, and rose again to meet another gust. Overhead, the sky was all blue and silver. From the ground the mingled perfume of wild roses and sagebrush rose up to fill the air with sweetness.

Kent, holding the horses and waiting for Phyllis, broke into singing.

"We'll all go ahunting today," he began. And Phyllis from her bedroom where she was putting the finishing touches to her toilet, joined in with the second line—"All nature looks smiling and gay"—and ran out to join him.

"What a day for a ride. Perfect, isn't it?" She gave the young man a joyous smile as she dropped into the saddle. "How disappointed I should have been if you hadn't asked me to go with you!"

This was to be a very special occasion—a whole day's ride. They were going to look at some horses that were for sale at a ranch far down the valley toward Fort Qu'Appelle, farther than Phyllis had ever ridden in that direction.

As they headed into the trail that cut across a hundred-acre wheat field, Jennie whinnied from the pasture. She was standing with her head over the fence watching them, and by her side her week-old foal threw up his head and watched, too.

"What a little beauty he is," said Phyllis fondly. "That white star on his forehead. . . ."

"Yes, he's a fine little chap. A good start for our horse ranch to be!"

They reached the valley, walked their horses down the long hill, cantered across the meadow, and forded the river. Kent waved toward the MacDonalds' house, just in case anyone should be looking their way. From the strawberry patch behind the house, Phyllis fancied that she saw a dark-blue figure straighten up and give an answering wave. She pitied Flora, lonely there, and she herself having such a lovely time.

"Shall we ask Flora to come with us?" she exclaimed impulsively.

Kent hesitated. "Do you really want to?"

"No-o, but. . . ." She glanced again at the distant figure in the strawberry patch.

"Then we won't." Kent touched Gray Lady with the whip, and she broke into a canter.

So it was out of her hands and settled, and Phyllis was glad. Soon Flora and her loneliness were forgotten, crowded out of her mind by the happiness that seemed to fill it.

It was noon and they were hungry when the ranch house came in sight. Mr. and Mrs. Moore, the young couple who owned the ranch, were just sitting down to their midday meal and would hear of nothing but that Kent and Phyllis should sit down with them.

"Sandwiches, indeed!" exclaimed the husband as Phyllis protested that they had brought lunch with them, "when there's one of Janet's good stews all ready to go on the table. That's not the way we do things in the Northwest, Miss Vernon."

"It certainly smells tempting," Phyllis admitted, wrinkling up her nose, while the black-haired, buxom young woman whom her husband called "Janet" lifted onto the table a big brown pot wrapped round with a white napkin. "I think we are very lucky."

There were only two rooms in the Moores' house—a bedroom and the kitchen in which they ate and which Phyllis could see was also their sitting room, for a rocker and sewing basket stood under one of the windows and opposite it was a substantial wooden chair of a size that seemed suited to the proportions of the burly proprietor. It all looked very settled and comfortable, and she wondered how long they had lived there.

"We were here long before the railroad came through," said Mrs. Moore in reply to her question.

"And that girl drove the wagon all the way from Winnipeg," asserted her husband proudly, pointing his knife at her across the table. "Four horses she handled, and did

it to the queen's taste. Where was I, do you say?" He guffawed. "I was riding herd to a bunch of cayuses we brought up to start our ranch, and scared every night the Indians would stampede them."

Phyllis laid down her knife and fork and looked from one to the other. "And I thought I was doing something just to come from England comfortably in a boat and a train! You must be a wonderful driver, Mrs. Moore. Wasn't the trip pretty hard?"

Phyllis saw the husband and wife exchange glances of mutual understanding before Janet laughed and replied, "We were just married. I loved every minute of it. And every minute since," she added, "even when the baby came."

"A baby! Have you a baby?"

Mr. Moore nodded his head toward the closed door. "Asleep in there. A year old. Finest little girl in the Northwest."

"Don't boast, Sam," his wife reproved him. "Remember, we don't see any other babies."

But Phyllis quite agreed with him when the child was brought in, looking with her dark hair, pencil-fine eyebrows, and high color, strikingly like her mother.

The business of discussing the horses took so long and the Moores were so hospitable and so insistent that their guests should not go without an afternoon cup of tea, that it was suppertime before Kent and Phyllis were back at the ford.

"How about it?" asked Kent, as the horses stretched their necks to drink from the stream. "Are you tired or would you like to ride a little farther and see how the new barn is coming on?"

"Not tired a bit. I'd love it." Phyllis leaned forward to give Topsy the full length of the reins and watched her drink her fill, then raise a dripping mouth and shake her head dry. The water rippled past the horses' legs; it gurgled between moss-grown rocks. A dragonfly, turquoise blue, darted by. Among the reeds at the water's edge three-petaled arrowheads glistened white in the afternoon sun.

"Isn't it all lovely?" cried the girl. "I think I envy you, going to live here."

Kent looked as if he were going to say something, but the horses were already scrambling up the bank.

The new barn showed its rafters to the sky. It stood against a background of wooded hill, and the ground before it sloped gently down toward the river. They couldn't have picked a better place, thought Phyllis, so pleased with the outlook that she hardly heard Kent telling her that Berry and he had chosen this site because there was a spring just up the hill behind them.

"Oh, then you'll be able to pipe water down into the house," she exclaimed as she woke from her reverie.

"The practical Miss Vernon," Kent teased. "It takes a woman to think of convenience."

He showed her the inside of the barn, explained where

the hay would be stored, where the stalls and loose boxes were to be built, and pointed out the corner set aside for the saddle room—"where a man can sleep, at times, if need be."

When a foal is expected, thought Phyllis out of her new knowledge of the ways of foals and mares.

"But you haven't said where the house is going to be." Queer how a man cared more about a barn than about where he'd live himself.

"Of course there will have to be a shack of some sort before winter, but that can wait—until we've sold this year's crop. I prefer a tent in summertime, anyhow."

How pleased, how satisfied, he seemed with everything, thought Phyllis. He didn't mind a bit leaving her and Berry and living here all by himself. And she would miss him so dreadfully, she knew she would. It gave her a pain in her heart just to think of it.

"Well, it's all lovely," she forced herself to say. "But don't you think we'd better be starting for home?" She turned to Topsy, gathered up the reins, and stood waiting for Kent's hand to help her mount.

But he did not move. Instead he leaned against his horse, and looking down on her, said in a low voice, "There's one thing lacking—you."

Phyllis's heart began to beat; her color rose; she could not look up.

"I'm all in the dark," he went on. "Is it to be Taylor?"

And when she could not control her voice at once to answer —"Anyone can see how he feels about you."

Now she managed to shake her head. "I told him," she stammered, and stopped.

"Yes," Kent prompted her, "you told him? . . ."

She could feel his eyes on her face. Well, it was now or never. "I said," she began in a small voice, "I told him—there was someone else." Then she blushed furiously. What a thing to say! It was almost like proposing.

Phyllis felt herself drawn into a pair of strong arms. "Darling girl. Can I ever let you go after that?"

As she let herself rest there, her face snuggled against his tweed coat, the strangest feeling came over her—that she was "home" at last. Tears of happiness rose to her eyes.

Kent lifted her face and kissed her tenderly. "What," he said drolly, pulling out his handkerchief, "am I still the official eye wiper?"

"But it ought to be someone like Janet Moore," she objected, when he at last helped her into the saddle.

"Janet's a fine lass." He looked up at the girl perched above him with something in his eyes that made her heart beat anew. "But Phyllis is my only joy."

The full moon was just showing above the horizon when the pair emerged from the shadows of the trees onto the prairie above. Streaks of gold and crimson still illuminated the western sky, and far to the south a line of light on the

horizon showed a distant prairie fire. The spicy odor of sagebrush filled the air.

They were walking their horses, riding with linked hands. To Phyllis it was an enchanted world. There was just one more thing to make it perfect. "Sing to me, Kent," she murmured, "sing 'Stars of the Summer Night.' "

Through the clear air and the scented dusk, the man's voice rang out—

> Stars of the summer night,
> Far in your azure deeps
> Hide, hide your golden light,
> She sleeps, my lady sleeps.

Berry, smoking his pipe and thinking of Mary as he leaned against the pasture fence, heard it from afar.

"Old Kent sounds happy," he said to himself. "I wonder if he and Phyl. . . ."

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June 12-			

Loomis 412

Ride Out Singing